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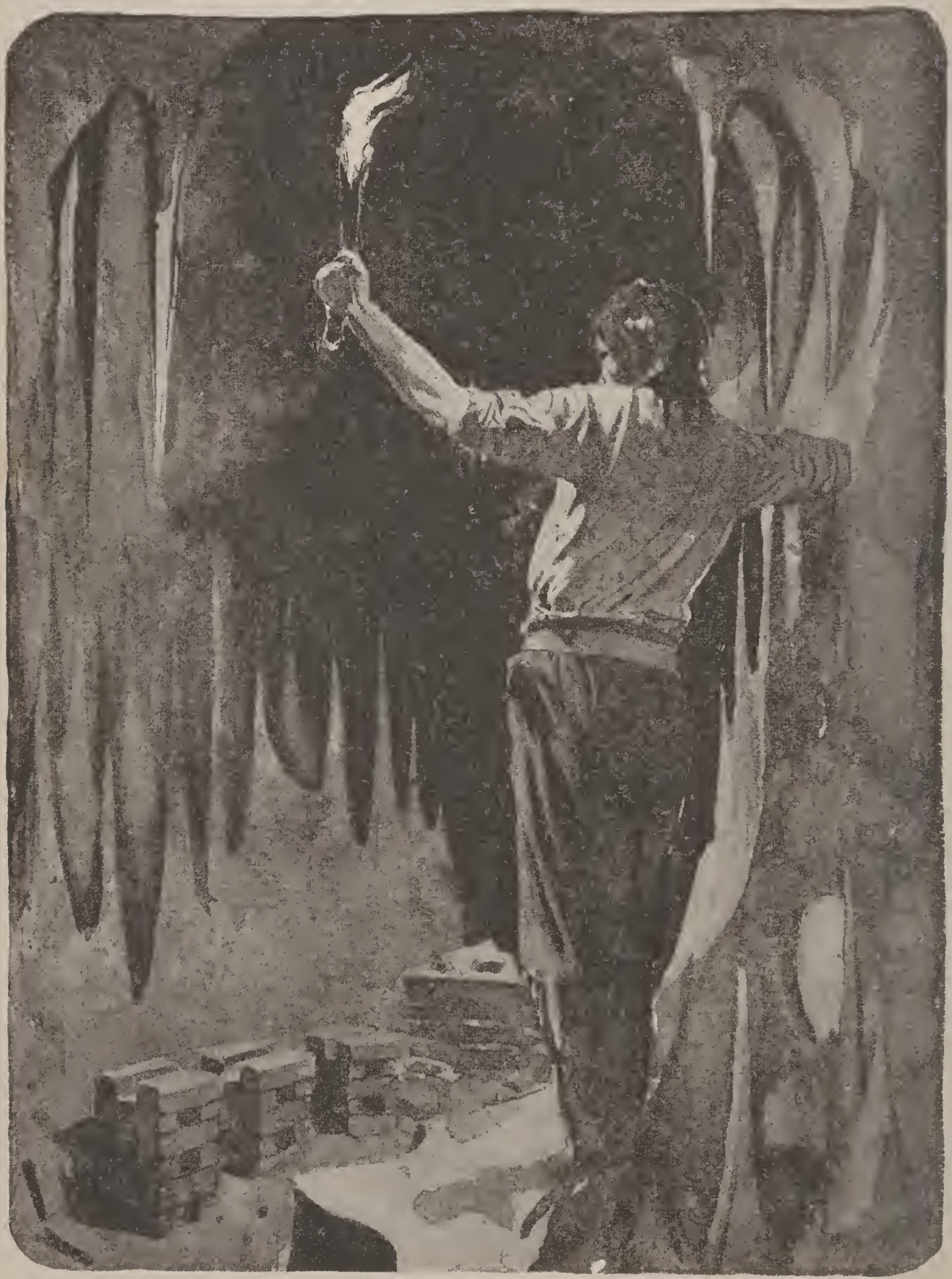
THE WHITE CAVE



"'THEY 'RE ALL PURE GOLD!' HE SAID ALOUD."

THE WHITE CAVE

BY

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NEW YORK
THE CENTURY CO.
1893

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THE DE VINNE PRESS.

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There were projecting white shapes here and there, rising right up from the floor. They were rounded and grooved and fluted, in strangely varied forms, and they seemed to stand up and point at other white shapes that reached down from the roof and pointed at them, and seemed to be trying to touch them. All in pure white they were, and the fire-glow danced and glittered among them until they looked as if they were dotted with polished jewels. It was not so, however; for, after all, they were nothing but stalactites and stalagmites such as dripping water manufactures out of limestone in any place where it can work undisturbed for thousands of years.

No doubt the man had seen it all before, and was used to it; for he did not express any surprise or delight. He piled more fuel on the fire, and then he lighted one end of a long stick of resinous wood and picked up a basket. The air was warm enough already, so that he must have needed fire for some other reason.

Glitter, flash, sparkle! More and more splendid grew that great, brilliant hall of whiteness, until the man returned from the other side, opposite the fireplace, with his basket full. It was full of coal,—full of fine, white, easy-kindling coal, such as belonged to that place and country. White coal burns just as well as black coal, but it is only to be found in some places. Putting it upon the fire diminished the glare, of course, until it could kindle up, and the man sat down upon the rock and waited. He looked at the fire and fanned the flame with a broad palm-

leaf, while the smoke of it went up through the crevice in the rock. There was a draft there which grew stronger and drew well, so that soon he did not need to fan any more. Then he turned and stared out into the darkness, on the side where there was no wall and where the firelight was soon lost in gloom.

There were no gray hairs upon the man's head, nor in his long beard and mustache. He could not have been of more than middle age, but his face was deep lined, as if he had done a great deal of hard thinking. He was in robust health, but the lines upon his face seemed also to say that he had suffered much, and it was a very troubled face. He stared and stared into the darkness, and then he muttered in a deep tone of voice:

"Vagabond! Hunted wolf! Wild beast! That 's what I am! What on earth was this place made for? What was it put here for? Why was I such a fool as to come here?"

He turned and put on more coal, while the draft up the crevice in the rock grew stronger and carried off the smoke more perfectly. It was a remarkable natural chimney, but there was no telling where it went to, or where or how all that smoke was going to get out into the world.

"I was n't a bad young fellow," he said, as he poked the fire. "I was a fool, that 's all. Well, well, I 'll eat something. I 've got to eat, I suppose. Then I 'll go to work. But what 's the use of my working? What good will it ever do me, or anybody else? Well, there 's no use grumbling now. It has got to be done whether I can tell why or not."

He arose and went in the direction in which the roof slanted downward and the floor slanted upward. The walls narrowed also, and before he had walked many paces he could almost have reached up and touched the rock above his head. The floor was fairly smooth, although there were great seams in it, and here and there a stalactite had grown down until it had joined a stalagmite on the floor, making a beautiful white pillar. At the foot of one of these there was another basket, woven of strips of palm-leaf, and he picked it up, carried it to the fire, and took off its cover, remarking:

"I must say that now and then I like a piece of broiled possum. Sometimes I don't like it, but just now I could eat almost anything. I'll have a possum broil. Humph! Cutlets!"

He pulled out some pieces of fresh meat, took up a long forked stick, put one of the pieces on the fork, and sat down before the fire to cook it. As the cooking went on, however, the sad look on his face softened and vanished.

In that strange, vast, glittering white kitchen where he was broiling his possum cutlets, nobody could have told whether it was to-day, or yesterday, or to-morrow, or morning, or noon, or night. But in another place, many miles away, it was about the middle of the forenoon.

A six-mule team, hitched to a very well made, white-tilted wagon, had been halted upon a gently rising ground, and all around them, and behind and ahead of them, there was a wild medley of dogs, horses, and men. On the slope, below, there was another group, all on horseback,—one large,

dignified-looking man; one equally dignified and very fine-looking woman; two boys of about fifteen, perhaps, and one girl younger than either of them. They were all gazing back, as if at something they were leaving.

The scene they beheld was beautiful. As far as the eye could reach, there were undulating pasture-lands, unfenced, dotted with flocks of sheep and herds of cattle; but what they were really interested in was near at hand. A large, two-story house of stone, with wings and a long rear addition, and with many outbuildings, stood upon a slight elevation. In front was a shaven lawn, ornamented here and there with trees, some of which were evergreens and shade-trees of other sorts, but there were also fig-trees and a kind of orange. Every side of the house, and each wing even, had a wide veranda. The windows had inner blinds and outer white-canvas hoods. There was an observatory on the roof. All around and near the house was a kind of Eden. Trees, fruits, vines, flowers, vegetables seemed to have found a place where they could grow and prosper in marvelous luxuriance. Graveled walks, arbors, vistas of shade and sunshine, made it all very beautiful. The house itself was built in a costly way, and as if wealth and good taste had done all that they could for it, without and within. For all that, however, it was nothing but a farm-house. All the grassy rolls and levels, for miles and miles around, were nothing but a great, fifty-thousand-acre sheep-farm.

"Hugh," exclaimed one of the boys, holding in his somewhat restive horse, "'the Grampians' is just beautiful!"

"It 's never prettier than it is about this time," said Hugh. "This fine, hot December weather makes everything come right out. I don't care, though! I say, ho for the bush!"

He was a blue-eyed, strongly made young fellow, and his fresh, bright face was all aglow with excitement. His companion was of about the same height, but somewhat slenderer. He was dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a look of wiry toughness, and his face had a keen, inquiring, intelligent expression.

The horse which carried the girl at that moment pushed forward between them.

"Oh, Hugh!" she exclaimed, "then for England! I love 'the Grampians,' and I really want to see the bush, but then—England!"

"All, right, Helen," responded the very dignified man, in a deep, full voice; you shall see the bush and the mountains, and then we are off for England! That 's settled!"

"Aunt Maude!" said Helen, with even increasing eagerness, "how long are we to stay in the woods? How many days will it be, Uncle Fred?"

"Why, Helen Gordon, you should not be so impatient—"

"Perhaps two or three days, Helen. You will enjoy it, and the boys—"

His horse cut off his answer by a sudden plunge. Aunt Maude's was also curveting spiritedly. It seemed that

even the quadrupeds felt the exhilaration of the air and scene.

"Ah, but, Ned," said Hugh, "then you 'll be off for the United States, old fellow!"

"Hurrah for that, too," replied Ned. "Father sent in his resignation months ago. He says he has played consul at Port Adelaide long enough. He wants to get back to where they don't have Fourth of July weather at Christmas. And so do I—but I must say this is great!"

One of the men near the wagon was just then remarking to his mate:

"B'ys, it 's the grand picnic we 're goin' on. To think o' them tryin' to have a good time in the bush!"

"Never you worrit your soul about Sir Frederick Parry," was the half-crusty response of another of the men, "nor Leddy Maude, ayther. They know what they 're about."

Perhaps they did, and her ladyship had said to her husband that very morning:

"Indeed, Sir Frederick, if for nothing more, I am glad we are to make this excursion. I should hardly like to confess, in England, that I had lived here so long and had never so much as looked into the wilderness. And especially when it comes almost at our very doors."

"You will see it now, Maude," he replied heartily. "I am glad everything is so entirely safe. No more black savages in the country; no dangerous wild animals left; no more bushrangers; fine weather—we shall have a perfect picnic."

FORWARD! INTO THE BUSH!

This, therefore, was the treat anticipated by this excited, happy, jubilant party, who were looking back at "the Grampians" farm and farm-house.

There came the sharp crack of a whip, and the mules leaned forward in their harness, while all the party on the slope wheeled their horses and dashed gaily past the wagon. Ahead of them all, laughing and shouting merrily to each other, rode Helen Gordon and the two boys. Her blue eyes were dancing with animation; her golden hair was fluttering loosely in the warm north wind blowing over the plain; her healthy red cheeks were flushed. And Helen was a very pretty young English girl.

"Hugh," said Ned, "look at her! One of these days she will be as splendid-looking as your mother is. She looks like her already."

"Mother's hair is redder than Helen's is," said Hugh. "It 's as red as mine." As for Sir Frederick's, it was of a light brown, and closely cropped. He had gray eyes, a firm, strong mouth, and a clean-slaven face; and he was particularly well dressed—for a picnic in the bush.

The mule-driver shouted vigorously at his team, and the entire party passed on over the brow of the hill. At that very moment, away off in that other place, where there was no hot December sunshine, nor any wind, nor any voice but his own, the red-bearded man, sitting in front of his fire, held up his cutlet of possum-meat, and said:

"I think it 's done — Hullo! What 's that?"

There was no one there to answer.

He turned his face quickly toward the dark part of the cave, and listened.

Out of that vast, mysterious gloom and whiteness there came, all the while, the river of dull, muffled, roaring sound; but now it grew stronger for a moment. Something like a crash mingled with it, and that was followed by a reverberation resembling the tones of a sonorous church-bell.

"I must look out," he remarked, "or some day one of those things will fall on me, and make an end of me. Not that I 'd care much, but then — I must n't think of that. I declare, when a fellow is right-down hungry, he can eat broiled possum-meat and enjoy it. I 'll eat all I can, and then go to work. First of all, though, I must go and get some water."

He did not seem to have much kitchen furniture, but he owned an old rusty tin pail, and a coil of rope-cord that looked as if he might have braided it himself, out of some kind of bark fiber. He pulled the cord and pail out from among the white pillars where he kept his baskets. Then he lighted his torch-stick, and set off down the slope. Everything around him glittered and glimmered in the torch-light as he walked along, but his bare feet made no noise upon the smooth, rocky floor. The descent was not steep, but the upward slant of the roof was more rapid, and so was the spread of the side walls. So the great dark cavern he was in grew more and more ghostly and solemn as he advanced. He walked on and on until, when he

looked up, he could see only glistening white points among the shadows overhead, while the roaring sound grew nearer and louder, and had in it something of dashing and splashing. There were currents of air which made the torch flare and flicker, but they were not strong enough to blow it out.

"A fellow ought to be safe, away in here. But he is n't," remarked the man, once more looking up, and at that moment something white came flashing down. It looked like a streak of white for a half-second, and then there was a crash, a bang, and the vast cavern rang again with the strange, bell-like noise. One of the largest stalactites of the roof had broken off and fallen to the floor, and now its main stem and several smaller fragments rolled and tumbled thunderously down the slope.

"What a crash!" said the man, as if speaking to somebody. "It has gone down the chasm. If I had been under it, I 'd have been crunched like a beetle. There would have been the end of me. Well, nobody else knows where I am, anyhow; and I don't know, myself, what I am here for. It really would not make any difference whether I am killed or not."

About a minute after that, he stood still and held up his torch. He was standing upon the brink of an exceedingly grim kind of a precipice. It was as if the rock floor under him had been broken off there. All before him was thick darkness, when he lay flat down upon the rock and lowered his pail by the rope; but, as he held out his torch, he

could faintly see the foaming, tumbling surface of a torrent which poured swiftly along at the bottom of the chasm.

"Almost a hundred feet of rope," he said to himself. "It 's good water after you 've got it, but nobody can say whether or not it has anything to do with the other river above ground. I don't care. No torch that I ever brought here would throw light enough to show me the other side of this gulf I mean to make a big blaze some day, and see what it will bring to light out there. Now I must go back and get at my work."

He was pulling up his rope and pail, hand over hand, while he was speaking.—And, during all this time, Sir Frederick Parry's six-mule team had been pushing merrily forward, with himself and Lady Maude riding a little ahead of it. The dogs of the party were only three in number, and each of them was tugging vigorously against the cord by which the hand of a horseman held him back. Helen and Hugh and Ned were free, however, and they were cantering sharply some distance in advance of the rest.

"We might see game!" Hugh had said.

They were all three glancing around among the trees and bushes, as they went, and it was plain that each boy was trying to seem to ride easily while carrying a heavy double-barreled gun.

"Boys!" suddenly Helen all but screamed, "look there!"

"Quick, Ned!" shouted Hugh, as he pulled hard upon his bridle.

SHOOTING AT THE DINGOES.

Ned's horse may have been the quieter, for his gun was up first.

"Oh, how cruel!" cried Helen. "Shoot them!"

There was an old wagon-track, but not a road, and in the middle of the track, not many yards beyond her, lay the torn carcasses of several sheep, while over them snapped and snarled savagely nearly a dozen ferocious-looking animals.

"Wolves!" said Ned, as he fired.

"Wild dogs!" shuddered Helen.

"Dingoes!" replied Hugh, as he fired both barrels of his gun.

There were four gun-reports, and these were followed quickly by the bang, bang, seven times, of a small revolver in the hand of Helen Gordon.

"Frederick!" exclaimed Lady Parry.

"What is that? Ride on! Hurry!"

"B'ys!" roared the driver of the mule team, "on with ye's! Quick!"

Down came his long, cracking whip-lash over his unlucky mules; on dashed the mounted men; forward sprang the spirited horses which carried the baronet and his wife.—The first exciting adventure of that excursion party had come to them before they were two miles from "the Grampians" farm-house.

CHAPTER II

THE PERILS OF THE BUSH

IR FREDERICK'S horse had gone forward with a great bound, at the sound of the firing, but he and Lady Maude drew rein side by side, a few seconds later, at the spot where Hugh and Ned were trying to quiet their excited ponies. Helen's pony was behaving very well, but her revolver was empty.

"O Aunt Maude!" she cried. "I do hope I hit some of them!"

"I hope you did! I 'm glad some of them were hit," replied Lady Maude, with energy.

Wolves, wild dogs, dingoes, whatever they were to be called, all had vanished except a pair lying still among the torn and bleeding bodies of the baronet's lost sheep. Of course the boys had not aimed very well, and perhaps Helen had not really hit anything; but such a storm of leaden pellets had been sent that some of them had found their marks.

"Dingoes!" growled Sir Frederick. "The worst enemies of sheep-farming!"

"Hugh," said Ned, looking down at the pair they had killed, "they 're savage-looking fellows. Are they ever dangerous?"

"They would be, if cornered," said Hugh, "but they 'd never come near a party like ours. They 're natural cowards!"

They were ugly-looking brutes, and Helen said so, pointing her empty revolver at them, while Aunt Maude pitied the poor, slaughtered sheep. Sir Frederick and his men did not say much, but they were evidently more than a little surprised and annoyed by the presence of so many dingoes so very near "the Grampians."

The boys reloaded their guns before remounting the ponies, and Helen also filled all the seven chambers of her pretty silver-finished weapon.

"I 've had target practice enough," she said, "and I mean to hit something else, while we 're in the bush."

Her rosy face was aglow with a hunting-fever, and with courageous readiness for whatever might come. It made her uncle and aunt laugh to look at her, but Lady Maude remarked:

"I think I shall carry a revolver, too. There is one in the strong box that is n't too large for me to carry."

Everybody else seemed to be taking an increased interest in the excursion, including the three men, who had been almost pulled out of their saddles by the tugging of the dogs.

In the cavern, meanwhile, the red-bearded man, after bringing his pail of water, had found a singular piece of work to do. He went in among the group of white pillars, and brought out a large red-clay crucible, rudely fashioned and very thoroughly fire-marked. He settled it down among the coals, and heaped them around it. He went again, and returned with a heavy leather bag, out of which he took something or other which he dropped, piece by piece, into the crucible. It was chiefly in small fragments that were weighty, considering their size. When that was done, he went again and brought out a palm-leaf basket that was very heavy indeed, for it was full of fine, dusty, yellow sand. He poured it into a broken hollow in the rocky floor near the fire, and made several dents in its surface by pressing down into it a small piece of wood. Each dent was as large as two fingers of a man's hand, and he packed the dust hard around the stick, each time, so that the dents kept their shape after it was taken out.

"There," he said, "the molds are ready. There 's a good fire, but there won't be any melting right away. It takes time for that. I think I will go out and look around."

He poked the fire, put on more coal, peered into the crucible, and then he made a loose coil of his rope. The pail was still full of water, and he remarked :

"That 's for Nig."

He picked up his rifle, and went toward the pillars at the upper end of the cavern. There were not many of them, and before he got through and beyond them the roof was

so low that his head almost touched it. Then it sloped lower and lower, and he had to stoop and then to creep. He crept along a sort of passage, such as is common among limestone rocks anywhere, and it grew narrower, until it was little more than wide enough for a man of his size to pass easily. At this point a fit of caution seemed to seize him, and he paused, listening.

"I can't help it," he said to himself; "I always feel as if somebody were after me. I *am* hunted, too, sure enough; —and they have barely missed me, sometimes."

He crept on again, listening and feeling his way in the darkness of that underground crevice. Probably he knew every inch of it, and, at last, he put out a hand and pushed sharply against something which fell back and let in a great glare of sunshine.

"I am always glad," he said, "to see daylight, whenever I can. It is n't of much use to me, that I know of. I seem to belong underground."

The expression of his face when he said that was sad, but it was also fierce and resentful. In a moment more he was out of the crevice, and was standing erect among some bushes, while on either side of him were what looked like huge tree-roots. The thing which he had pushed away to let him out was a big piece of bark, fitted in between two of those gnarled, bunchy roots. The bushes were thick, and there did not seem to be any path through them. He walked on cautiously for a few yards, to where they were thinner and more open, and then he looked up.

"I always like to take a look at my mountain ash," he remarked. "They say some of its kind are larger, but I don't believe it."

He had reason for such a doubt, for it was certainly a large tree. It was between sixty and seventy feet around, at the height of a man from its base. There was not a branch upon its massive trunk for over a hundred feet from the ground, but there they began, and the spreading crown of the forest monarch was lifted proudly up at a height of more than four hundred feet. It was a grand sentinel to stand at any man's door, even at the door of so strange a house as that in which this remarkable man had broiled his slices of possum. He was now standing in a hollow between the roots of the giant, and was peering cautiously in all directions. All was dense forest, and there was a deep forest silence. He seemed to be satisfied that he was alone there, for he stepped out with his rifle and the coil of rope over his shoulder, and his pail of water in his hand.

"Nig, first," he said. "I 'll keep an eye out after game, but I must n't waste any ammunition, with so few cartridges left. Anyhow, I don't believe I 'm in any special danger just now. There is n't another living soul in all this part of the bush."

That might be, but in another part of the bush Sir Frederick Parry was just recovering from a hearty fit of laughter.

"Dingoes?" he said. "She won't see any more of them; but it 's good fun to see how she and the boys are hunting."

"I believe we are really going to enjoy it," said his wife, "and so will they."

"Of course they will," he replied. "Helen 's ready to shoot anything. Well, Maude, we can sail for England in January, just in our midsummer; and we shall get there in April, and have summer weather all the way and afterward. Quite the longest summer you ever had in your life. Then, if we are to come back here, and if we leave England before October, it will be two whole years of summer, with bits of spring and autumn."

"I don't care so much for that," said Lady Maude, "but I hope we shall not lose ourselves in this wilderness."

"There 's not the least danger of that," he replied confidently. "I know exactly what to do, and so do the men."

Nevertheless, as they went along, the men were telling each other wild tales of what things had happened to explorers of those endless forests and of the rugged mountain ranges. Even Helen and the boys, in spite of their keen lookout after game, were remembering and telling all they had ever heard of adventures in that only half-discovered country. Ned, indeed, had more to say about American Indians and California gold-mines, while Hugh seemed to be especially well informed concerning the degraded and merciless black cannibals of Australia, who were now nearly all gone. All three of these young folk, however, seemed to have heard and read a great deal about the old system of making that new land a state prison for English convicts. They told what dreadful fellows these were, and

how many of them escaped into the "bush" and became veritable white savages — hardly less terrible than blackfellows themselves.

It was really comforting to be able to assure one another that there were no wild men of any kind in all that part of the country, while it was said that the forests had now more game in them than ever before.

"Get lost?" remarked Hugh, contemptuously, in answer to a question of Helen's. "No, indeed! Why, we could n't possibly get lost. Not such a party as ours, and going only a couple of days out from 'the Grampians.' Oh, but won't we have a good time!"

The whole party responded with a cheery shout, and Sir Frederick gave orders to get as far into the bush as possible before going into camp for the night.

Whatever the red-bearded man in the cave had been doing, he had now returned, and was once more standing in front of the fire. Beside him, on the floor, lay a huge bird that looked something like an ostrich; but he remarked of it:

"Emu-meat is dry stuff. I 'm glad I lassoed him, and did n't have to waste a cartridge. This and the rest of the possum will be provisions enough to start with. I wish Nig were shod, though, for he 's got a hard trip to make. I 'm going to the gulch just this once, and I 'll bring back every ounce there is left. It 's a big risk to take, too, with those fellows on the watch for me."

All the while, as he talked, he was poking in the crucible with a long iron rod.

"Ready?" he exclaimed at last. "I 'll finish this job, and then hurrah for the mountains! I 'll be glad to live in the open air for a while."

He took up a long, stout pole, with a fork at one end. He shoved the fork in among the coals until it had a good hold of the crucible. Of course it caught fire, but he did not seem to mind that. He lifted the crucible, and swung it around to the spot on the floor where he had made his sand molds. He tipped the nozle slowly over one of the molds, and a red, brilliant, fiery stream of something liquid began to pour out. He filled one mold after another until the fluid ceased to run.

"Five!" he exclaimed. "About three pounds apiece. Now, would n't that band of rascals over in the gulch have got a good haul if they had bagged me the last time I went? Some of their bullets whizzed pretty close, too. They would give something to know where I left the rest of it, or when I 'm coming after it—the robbers! Land pirates! I got away that time, and Nig and I have only got to try it this once more. We can beat 'em. I 'll just let those slugs cool where they are. They may never be of any use, to me or anybody else, but I like them, somehow."

In a few minutes more he was out in the open air. He carried a pail of water, and he had his rifle and his rope; but over his shoulder were also slung a saddle, bridle, saddle-bags, a bundle, and a long-handled spade.

The bark door between the tree-roots had been closed

with care, and only the sharpest eyes could have discovered any trace of his passage through the bushes. On he walked for about ten minutes, and then he came to an open grassy place. All around it trees and bushes grew thickly, luxuriantly, in a way to explain why it had been chosen both for a pasture lot and for a place to hide a horse in.

There he was, nibbling busily at the grass, a large, strong-looking horse, very black, and in good working condition, for he was not by any means too fat. The approach of his master's feet was noiseless, so that he had no warning; but there came a shrill whistle from the edge of the bushes, and Nig knew it. He began to prance.

"Glad I've come, are you?" said the man, as he drew nearer. "Well, you need n't be. I've brought you another job through the mountains, with a heavy pack to bring back this way."

Nig neighed again, as if he were quite willing, although it was getting somewhat late in the day. He was soon bridled and saddled and mounted.

Nig and his master were just setting out upon their journey, wherever it was to take them. They were fresh and bright; but that was more than could be said of six mules, who had been pulling a tilted wagon through forest ways, hour after hour, in all the heat of real December weather. They were not the only creatures who were feeling it, and one of the consequences was a succession of shrill cries, which began to sound through the silence of the forest.

"Hugh!" exclaimed Ned, as he turned in his saddle and listened, "what 's that?"

"I heard it," said Hugh. "It means to come back. They 've halted."

"Coo-ee-e! Coo-ee-e! Coo-ee-e!" came the cry again, full and clear.

"Don't you know?" said Hugh. "That 's the call of the herdsmen. It 's the way they keep track of each other in the bush. You can hear it ever so far, and the sheep and cattle and horses know it."

"Boys," said Helen, "we must go back. That was Uncle Fred's voice."

They obeyed the call; but neither they, nor the red-bearded cave-man, nor anybody in all that part of the bush, could hear another set of calls, of much the same sort, which were sounding at the same time. They were sounding in an even wilder place, moreover; for it was as solitary, while instead of trees and shrubbery there were rocks and ledges and dangerous-looking gullies. "Coo-ee-e" after "coo-ee-e" echoed among the quartz and granite masses, calling and answering each other, and then a group of half a dozen men gathered upon a gravelly level. They were a rugged and ragged and really savage-looking company, and, as they came together, one of them called out:

"No, boys, we have n't found it yet; but we shall find it. It is hereabout, somewhere. Besides, he 'll be coming after it, and we shall get it then if we can't find it now."

"His time 's about up, if he 's coming," replied another man. "Maybe he is n't far away now. We 'd better wait and watch for him, the next few days."

"That 's so," said a hoarse and mocking voice, "and we must n't shoot too quick when we sight him."

"Shoot? No; of course not," said the first speaker, with a laugh of wolfish cunning. "What we want is just to nab him. Then we can threaten him till he tells where he hid every ounce he took out of his gulch. First and last he took out a heap, and it 's hid away somewhere."

"Threaten him?" said a big, hard-faced fellow. "We 'll tie him to a sapling and soon make him tell all he knows."

"What 'll we do then?" asked another.

"What? Why, find out if he 's told the truth; and if he has, and as soon as we 've bagged all his nuggets, all we 've got to do is to leave him tied there, if we like. That 'll be the end of the matter."

The whole half-dozen growled a fierce, cruel growl of assent to that idea. They were angry at having hunted and waited long without success, and they looked more and more wolfish as they talked. And all the while Nig was bringing his master nearer and nearer.

CHAPTER III

BOOMERANGS

EVERAL long days after Sir Frederick Parry's excursion party set out so merrily from "the Grampians," the hot December sunlight shone down over the wilderness, and sent its searching rays into many wild-looking places.

One of them was a mountain pass, between gigantic and almost perpendicular walls of rock, which were grandly high, and shattered, and irregular. Only here and there could the sunshine reach the boulder-strewn, natural road at the bottom of the pass. No wagon could have traveled that road, but a horse could do so, or a man; and in and out among the boulders, carefully picking his way, a man was leading a heavily laden horse. The animal was large, and strong, and bony, and so was the man. The horse was black, and looked as if his coat had never known a currycomb or a brush. At intervals the man cast quick, anxious glances behind him, up the pass.

"They 're after me again," he exclaimed. "I knew they 'd follow me, as soon as I met that fellow Jim. They have n't

caught up yet, though; and I 'll beat them, this time, as I have beaten them before. But it won't do to push too fast with such a cargo as this."

He was silent, for a moment, while he helped the horse through a bad place, throwing some fragments of rock out of the way with an ease that suggested a reason why no one man would be likely to stop him. Then he added:

"I won't have to visit that gulch again. I 've emptied my old hiding-place this time, and I 'm bound to land this cargo in the cave. What I 'll do then I don't know; but I won't let that crew of robbers get it. And they sha'n't get me, either."

In another forest place, there was a long but not very wide level of rich green grass, surrounded by remarkable trees, some of which were enormously tall; and it seemed as if several of them had found themselves too crowded, and had moved out and selected new standing-places in the open prairie. These prairie trees were at considerable distances from each other, and one of them had queer company.

It was a company of four, and they were four-footed animals, but they did not seem to know what to do with their feet. When they sat down, they still appeared to be standing up, and the largest of them, when sitting, held his head as high as that of a man.

They were evidently in their own pasture-ground, for they were feeding, but they kept up the most timid and ceaseless watch in all directions. A hunter would have said that they would prove as difficult to "stalk" as a herd of red deer.

Along the easterly edge of the open pasture ran a line of dense bushes; and completely hidden behind one of these bushes two boys were lying upon the ground.

"Ned, look! I 'm glad we did creep up. There are four kangaroos!"

"Just what we 're after, Hugh," whispered Ned; "but they 're away out of range."

"I don't see how we can get any nearer," said Hugh. "They 're the timidest game! We 'll lose them, I 'm afraid."

"If we don't get one of them we 'll starve!" exclaimed Ned. "I wish I had a rifle instead of this double-barreled gun."

"And buck-shot won't reach them," said Hugh. "Maybe they 'll feed out this way. Wait."

"It 's hard to wait," said Ned. "Not a mouthful to eat since yesterday noon! I 'm fearfully thirsty, too."

"I 'm afraid they have n't any fresh meat in the camp, either," replied Hugh. "I wish we knew where it is. Mother 'll be dreadfully worried about us."

"Keep still," said Ned. "They 're moving!"

Ned and Hugh now stared more and more eagerly out at the group of kangaroos. At a little distance behind the

lads, a pair of saddled horses were tethered to a sapling, and behind each saddle was strapped a rolled-up blanket. Each of the boys carried a double-barreled, breech-loading "duck-gun." It was evident that they had wandered from the camp to hunt, and had lost their way.

"We must n't starve!" said Ned.

"If we were on the other side of that cabbage-tree," replied Hugh, "we 'd be within easy range of them."

That was precisely the reason why the cabbage-palm had yet other company, that sunny summer morning in December. Queer company were these, also — as queer as were the kangaroos themselves. Half a dozen dark, almost naked human forms seemed to be making use of the great tree to hide the crouching, creeping, snake-like gliding of their swift approach for a nearer look at their watchful game. They were gaunt and lean, but very muscular men. They were very black, with woolly hair, but they did not have African faces. Their bodies and limbs were marked with singular ridges of welts and scars, but they were not tattooed, and they did not carry any weapons of white men's manufacture. On the other hand, each of them seemed burdened with a curious collection of spears and sticks, although none had a bow.

"Hugh," said Ned, "there are bushes over there beyond that tree. We could creep close up, if we could get around to that side of it."

"We could get a brace of them!" replied Hugh, excitedly. "Let 's try."

A branch of a bush was just then waving slowly, out at the side of the trunk of the palm. It was as if the wind moved it, and it did not attract any attention from the kangaroos.

But there came, at that moment, a flash of quick and anxious intelligence into the dark, keen eyes of the Yankee boy.

"Lie low, Hugh!" he exclaimed. "Look! There is n't any wind. Something else must be moving that bush. Wait a bit."

"There it is again," said Hugh; "away out."

But neither of them could see through the dense foliage of the handful of twigs which waved up and down against the cabbage-palm. Eyes on the opposite side could see better than theirs, however, and a large, rolling, eager pair of very black eyes were using that green branch as a mask.

The black man watched the kangaroos intently for a moment, and he seemed to be taking a kind of measurement of their distance from the foot of the palm. Then he drew back, and a second black man took his turn at looking, with the bush-branches for a screen, and he also drew back. He put down the twigs, and the two seemed to be studying. Two men who could neither count nor measure, as civilized men count and measure, were in reality counting and measuring as accurately as if they had been a pair of surveyors with perfect instruments. They had dropped their spears and sticks before peeping out at the kangaroos, and now each of them stooped and

picked up a queer crooked club. All the other black men lay flat in the grass, while these two went on with their puzzling operations. Neither of them could see any part of a kangaroo through the trunk of a tree. Each stood and balanced himself, leaning forward, with his bit of curved wood held in his right hand by one end. Those crooked sticks were not much over two feet long, perhaps not more than two or three inches wide at the center, the widest part, and were made to taper at each end. They were curved on one face and flat on the other, and sharp at the edges. You would have said great pains had been taken to shape those sticks so that it would be impossible for anybody to throw them straight or make them hit any object they were thrown at.

Each black man held his dark, heavy-looking, wooden weapon with the flat side down, until he had finished balancing and calculating, and then he suddenly drew back and hurled it from him, with a peculiar, jerking twist of his wrist. Almost at the same moment, each of them stooped and picked another and threw it, and then a third. As the third cast was made, each uttered a loud, screeching yell, the two harsh cries bursting forth at almost the same second, followed by yells from all the rest of the party as they sprang from the grass, seized their spears and sticks and bounded forward.

Ned and Hugh had noted every movement of the green mask by the palm, and the kangaroos also must have begun to suspect danger, for all of them had ceased feed-

"HE SUDDENLY DREW BACK AND HURLED THE BOOMERANG."

ing, sat upright, and pricked their ears and turned their pretty heads inquiringly. The largest of them was in the very act of rising for a forward bound when something struck him upon the neck, just above the shoulder.

There had been a faint whizzing and whirring in the air. It began behind the cabbage-palm, and went out sidewise and upward through the air, while something dimly visible flashed away in a wide, sweeping curve. Up, up, up, went the whizz and whirl, and then down, down, after a strange, mysterious fashion, closely accompanied by another just like it. Then there was a thud, thud,—and the great kangaroo did not make his leap. He rolled over and over in the grass, for one of those wonderful missiles had actually broken his neck. And another kangaroo had fallen also.

"Hugh! Hugh!" exclaimed Ned, in a tone of intense excitement. "Boomerangs!"

"Boomerangs!" responded Hugh. "Oh, Ned! They must have been thrown by blackfellows! Everybody thinks there are none of them around here!"

"We must n't let 'em know *we* are here," said Ned.

"What if they find the camp!" gasped Hugh.

"Look," replied Ned. "Here come the other two kangaroos!"

"Don't shoot!" said Hugh, for Ned was raising his gun. "The bushmen will know we 're here."

But for all that he also cocked both hammers of his gun. There was no time for cool counsel, but the boys might

not have fired if it had not been for the reckless conduct of those escaping kangaroos.

With long, flying, frightened leaps, the unhurt pair dashed frantically toward the nearest cover, the very bushes where Ned and Hugh were hiding.

"They are coming right for us!" said Hugh. "The blackfellows will find us, anyhow."

The kangaroos were thinking only of getting away from the yelling black dangers that sprang out from behind the cabbage-palm. Near as they now came to the boys, they were not easy marks for any one but a very good shot. Crash, crash, crash, they came dashing into the dense barrier of the bushes and underbrush.

Bang, bang, went the ringing reports of two guns, for Hugh followed Ned's excited example.

"We 've bagged 'em both!" said Ned.

"Yes," said Hugh, "we have them. But now those black cannibals know we are here."

"They don't know how many there are of us," said Ned. "Look at them."

The foremost black men had been almost upon their game when the gun-reports reached their ears; and it looked as if all but one of them had been instantly killed, so suddenly did they drop into the grass where they stood, and lie still.

"Let 's get away," said Ned, "while our chance is good. Why! they have vanished like magic!"

The undulating level of rich grass did not seem to have one living creature upon its surface.

"WITH LONG, FRIGHTENED LEAPS, THE KANGAROOS DASHED FRANTICALLY TOWARD THE NEAREST COVER."

"They will lie there awhile," began Hugh, but Ned interrupted him suddenly, in a tone of intense anxiety:

"No, they won't! See the tops of that grass quiver, out yonder? One of them 's playing snake. You and I must get out of this, and be quick about it!"

"That 's so," exclaimed Hugh; "but as Bob McCracken 's been saying ever since we left 'the Grampians,' you 're a born scout. I 'd never have noticed that grass."

"Don't you see?" said Ned. "He 's snaking toward these bushes. As soon as he gets under cover he 'll come after us. Come along! We must move quickly!"

The boys were in a perfect tremble of excitement. Each slipped a fresh cartridge into his gun, and the horses were unhitched and led up to where the two kangaroos lay. They were smaller than the pair that had fallen under the boomerangs, for the black hunters had taken their choice. Still, it was a heavy lift for the boys to raise their unexpected prizes and to fasten them on the horses.

Hugh's rosy face, as he did so, wore only a look of boyish exuberance, without a shadow of fear; but he exclaimed: "Now, Ned, they 'll follow us. Anyhow, we 've seen how the blackfellows throw their boomerangs!"

Ned's movements seemed to be a trifle quicker than Hugh's, and he also appeared warier and cooler.

"We can get away," he said, "while that fellow in the grass is working around to find out about us. What would n't I give to know where the camp is!"

"It can't be so very far," said Hugh; and then the smile

left his face as he added, "Our people don't dream of there being any blackfellows in this neighborhood. It 's awful that we can't go in and warn them."

"They have the dogs," said Ned, as he urged his horse forward. "They can't be surprised. *We* are in a fix, though."

"We have something to eat, now, anyway," said Hugh. "We won't starve if we *are* lost in the bush."

"With blackfellows ready to spear us," said Ned, "as soon as we stop anywhere long enough to cook and eat!"

"We can fight any small squad of them," said Hugh, combatively.

"I 'd rather fight blackfellows than so many American Indians," replied Ned. "I guess they can't do much with boomerangs in the woods."

"They can use them pretty well," said Hugh, "and they can skulk around and throw spears and clubs."

"We must push right along," said Ned. "Keep in the open places. We 'll beat them."

The quivering motion in the tops of the prairie-grass had indeed been made by the snake-like passage of a savage body. It was altogether remarkable, too, how rapidly that short, bony, emaciated blackfellow could crawl; but he could not keep pace with a man walking, much less a nimble-footed Australian horse. He reached the line of bushes, at some distance from the spot where the boys had been lurking, and then he sprang to his feet. He could go faster after that, but he advanced with noiseless caution, for

he had no idea how many enemies might be near him, besides the two who had been firing. It was only a few minutes, however, as he drew nearer to the exact spot, before his black eyes began to glisten with a strange, fierce light; his lips drew back, disclosing the rows of large, white teeth; and his whole body quivered, as those of the two boomerang-throwers had quivered just as they were making their casts. He felt much as a wild beast feels when about to spring. He made no sound until, as he peered fiercely out from behind a bush, it flashed upon his keen, instinctive intelligence that the men who had fired the guns were gone. He darted out of his bushy cover. Swift and searching were the glances of his glittering eyes, and they did not miss a token that Ned or Hugh had left. He noted the footmarks; the bloody ground where the kangaroos had fallen; the trail made by the two horses as they went away; and then he raised his head.

A sound went out through the air and floated toward the cabbage-palm. It sounded as if it might have been the cry of a distant bird. It might almost have been the sigh of a wind among the trees; but it must have had some peculiar meaning, for the blackfellows who had been lying hidden in the grass, out in the prairie, were instantly upon their feet, racing swiftly to join their comrade in the bushes.

At that very moment, but several miles away, a very different kind of sound seemed to be hunting, hunting,

hunting around among the trees. It came from different human voices, and in all of them it was both inquiring and plaintive.

"Coo-ee-e? Coo-ee-e? Coo-ee-e?"

The several voices were not answering one another, apparently, but each was asking the whereabouts of some one who did not as yet hear or answer. They grew more and more anxiously questioning, as the deeper or shriller-toned "coo-ee-es" vainly rose and fell among the silent shadows of the endless forest.

"Coo-ee-e—Oh, Aunt Maude! I can't call any more! But hear the men. I wish the boys could hear them!"

"Helen! Your pony!"

He was a spirited, handsome little fellow, and while Helen's earnest blue eyes searched among the trees, the pony's forefeet left the ground and he made a sudden leap over a fallen tree.

"Helen! Be careful!"

There was apparently no need for her aunt to caution her, for she followed every movement of the pony as if she had been part of him. So did Lady Parry keep her own place in the saddle of the larger and more powerful animal which carried her over the same barrier. On horseback, or anywhere else, she was always a very stately, self-possessed, and dignified lady.

"Keep right on, Helen," she said. "I must know what they are going to do next. We *must* find those boys!"

"Oh, it is dreadful!" replied Helen.

"HELEN'S PONY MADE A SUDDEN LEAP OVER A FALLEN TREE."

They both looked pale, pained — almost frightened, as they rode on, and they were all the while peering intently through the spaces of the forest, and listening.

"No, no," remarked Lady Maude, again and again; "there is no answer."

Only a short ride beyond them there was a vast, frowning wall of granite rock, rising almost perpendicularly hundreds of feet above the tallest trees. At the foot of this wall there rolled and tumbled and gurgled a torrent of clear water. Across the stream and against the rock went call after call; and they were thrown back among the tree-tops as if the very mountain was taking an interest in the matter and was shouting: "Coo-ee-e? Coo-ee-e?"

A moment later, a man on horseback rode out under the trees at the water's edge. It was Sir Frederick Parry, and he called to one of his men, near by:

"I can't coo-ee-e any more, but I wish those boys would turn up. Do you think we 're getting nearer to them, Bob?"

"Yes, sir," replied a very respectful voice, a little behind him. "Yes, sir. They 'll turn up before long, sir. Had n't we better go into camp, sir? We 've had a pretty long march since morning, sir."

"Right away, Bob. We 'll camp here."

"Coo-ee-e!" called Bob, as he dropped lightly from his horse. He raised his voice once more, in a different kind of cry, well known to the herdsmen, but he did not have to repeat it. Replies came at once from several other directions, as well as from the echoing mountain.

CHAPTER IV

A FIGHT IN THE FOREST

HE sharp, quick bark of an excited dog was followed by the loud neigh of a horse, the sonorous brays of mules, and then by the clear, musical baying of hounds.

"They 've started something, sir," said Bob. "I hope we may get it. Hear 'em, Sir Frederick?"

"I 'd like some fresh meat," remarked the baronet, as he wheeled his horse in the direction of the braying.

He looked well on horseback, for he was a large, muscular man, and a good horseman. His broad, resolute face was cleanly shaven, his light hair was short, he wore a palm-leaf hat; and he had an air of being carefully well-dressed in spite of circumstances.

As for Bob, he was a horseman of another kind. He was short, and thin, and bow-legged, and he seemed to be made of old saddle-leather. He wore leather gaiters up to his knees, one leather belt around his waist, and another over his shoulder. He wore a leather cap on his head, and he carried an all-leather whip in his hand.

The cries of the hounds ceased, just as Sir Frederick caught a glimpse of a wagon-tilt, and of the long ears of the mules.

"Marsh," he shouted, "what are the dogs after?"

"Dunno, sir," came dejectedly from the lips of a long, lank man, who rode at the side of the six-mule team. "I think likely it 's another sell, sir."

"I 'm afraid it is," replied Sir Frederick. "I never saw such a country. No game, no anything! I 'll try for some fish."

"I 'm glad there 's water, sir," groaned Marsh. "Not a drop since yesterday for the mules and horses, sir. The young gentlemen, too, sir. It 's awful, sir."

"They 'll be found," replied Sir Frederick. "We are going into camp over yonder. Bob will show you."

"See the dogs, sir! There they come," said Marsh, as mournfully as ever. "But it 's only another sell, sir."

Two more mounted men came cantering toward them, preceded by a tall, shaggy, woolly, lean dog, that barked at every third or fourth jump, and followed by a brace of fine deer-hounds that were now silent.

"Brand! Keets!" shouted Sir Frederick. "What was it?"

"Brand, he says it was a monkey, sir."

"Keets thought it was a bear, sir —"

"Nothing in the worruld but a sloth," sighed Marsh.

"Oh," said Sir Frederick, "the dogs have opened after a koala and he has got away! We can't chase game of that sort to-day. We 'll catch some fish."

"There 's water, then?" exclaimed Brand.

"Water?" echoed Keets. "Hurrah!"

Sir Frederick rode away toward the spot selected for the camp, directing Brand to bring him his fishing-tackle at once.

"It 's all the same, anyhow," said Marsh, as Brand returned from groping in the back part of the wagon. "Some folk calls 'em monkeys, and some calls 'em bears, or sloths, or koalas, and they is n't much of anything. I 'm 'fraid the young gentlemen 's hungry enough, though, by this time, to eat possums and rats."

"The blackfellows eat them," said Keets.

"I do hope Sir Frederick will get some fish," Marsh went on. "Leddy Parry and Miss Helen is tired of bacon. They 'll come up, right soon —"

Another bray of the mules interrupted him, and nobody seemed to notice that the dogs were still uneasy, especially the long-legged, woolly barker they spoke to as "Yip."

At that very moment, nevertheless, something not altogether unlike a monkey, but not at all like a bear, was returning toward them along the trail the dogs had abandoned. That trail had run out, or they might not so quickly have left it. At least, it had appeared to run against the roots of a tree, and had suddenly disappeared. It had really gone up the tree, and deer-hounds never climb. Neither could any ordinary white man or boy have made his way up the rugged side of that huge, gnarled trunk. Perhaps even the supposed monkey, or bear, or sloth, or koala

could hardly have done so, but for the aid of a stick that he carried. It was about a foot and a half in length, fire-hardened, and sharp at one end, and it helped him wonderfully in taking advantage of projections and of dents in the bark of the tree. He began to climb as soon as he heard the dogs, and in half a minute he was away up among the branches. Then, altogether like a monkey, or a bear, or a very active sloth, he clambered swiftly along one of the branches that overlapped a bough of another tree, and so he passed on into a new hiding-place. He was in his fifth tree when the hounds had reached the end of their trail, at his first tree, and he was in a hollow that hid him entirely. He was of about the size of a boy of fourteen, very black, woolly-headed, not so very bad-looking in the face, and he seemed to enjoy the fun of peering down upon the baffled dogs and hunters. He evidently regarded them all as his enemies; and so, perhaps, they were, for they were all foreigners, and he was a native — a pure-blooded young Australian, among his own forests, and now hiding in a fork of one of his own blue-gum trees.

The black boy in the tree hollow had with him four sticks. One was the sharp stick he had climbed with. Another was a club-stick or small-sized "waddy." Besides these he had a short, thin-stemmed spear, and a queer, notched bit of wood which belonged to the spear, for it was a "throw-stick" with which to sling the spear, instead of casting it with the hand.

There he sat, quite patiently, until Keets and Brand rode

away, followed by the dogs. He knew, now, part of the meaning of the coo-ee-e-ing he had heard, but he did not know it all, and he at once came down to the ground and began a search after more knowledge. It led him stealthily from cover to cover, until he caught a glimpse of the tilted wagon and the mules. Then his curiosity took hold of him with double strength. It drew him along the ground, under the protection of the grass and bushes and undergrowth, to the edge of the stream. He had reached a place some distance below the spot where Bob McCracken had already kindled a rousing fire, and near to which the now unhampered mules had hauled the wagon. He did not dare to get any nearer, but his black eyes gleamed and sparkled, and he moved his feet and hands as if he felt like dancing upon all of them.

His eyes and not his lips asked questions, but he seemed almost ready to yell with wonder at the appearance of Lady Maude Parry and her niece. They were such wonderful specimens of the great white race, and they were so wonderfully dressed. If, however, he were considering whether or not a black boy could get near enough to that camp to pick up anything good and carry it away, that question was answered for him by the dogs. Every man in the camp had said in some form:

"Yip, what is the matter with you? Do you smell game again?"

Sir Frederick still stood upon the rock, and he was fishing successfully, but his face was clouded.

"Where can those boys be?" he said to himself. "I 'm glad there are no blackfellows left in these parts. Ned and Hugh are in no danger of being speared."

Just then a sorrowful voice behind him exclaimed:

"Oh, Fred! Why did we ever come out into this wilderness?"

"My dear," replied Sir Frederick, as he landed a fish, "it was as much your idea as it was mine. We are not lost at all. Hugh will turn up — and Ned. Why, Helen, have you been crying?"

"Yes, she has," said her aunt. "I wanted to cry, myself, when I heard them all coo-ee-e so without any answer."

"I wish the boys were here."

"It seems to me as if they could not be far away," remarked Lady Parry, thoughtfully, and she was right.

Only a few miles from the spot where they were standing, Hugh was at that very moment saying to Ned:

"We must leave those blackfellows as far behind us as we can. We 've got to make a chance to cook some of our kangaroo-meat."

"I wish the blackfellows were about starved," said Ned, "so they 'd have to stop and do some cooking for themselves. They 're tremendous eaters."

"We 'll push right along," said Hugh; but if he could have looked through the trees and have seen the five other savages, who arose from the grass, join their scout, he would have tried to push on faster.

Each of them carried, in addition to his collection of ordinary spears and sticks, one stick more, to show that he

was not out upon a peaceful errand. It was a carved and ornamented piece of wood, about six inches wide in the middle, tapering to the ends, and about two and a half feet long. It was a club, but it had a handle in the middle, for it was also used as a war-shield.

Their antics and their fierce exclamations over the scout's discoveries plainly expressed their unbounded surprise as well as the rage that seized them at the presence of white men. Only a minute or so went by before the tall, muscular, big-headed savage who had thrown the first boomerang at the kangaroos, pointed at the spot on the prairie where his game still lay, and uttered some harsh, ragged-sounding words of command, for he was chief of that party. Then he pointed to the ground under his feet, and at the trail left by the horses. The other blacks went for the game, and he himself set out at once to follow the trail. At the moment, therefore, when Ned and Hugh were discussing that matter, the danger they dreaded was coming after them, as fast, or even faster, than their tired and thirsty horses were taking them away from it. They were making further remarks about the cruelty, treachery, stupidity, and other evil qualities of Australian black-men, and were picking their way among some thick, high bushes, when they heard a strange, vibrating cry at some distance behind them. It seemed as if it brought their hearts into their mouths, it was so fierce and threatening.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Ned. "Let's dismount. We can hide right here. Something's coming. Get ready!"

"I 'm ready," said Hugh, as they both sprang to the ground, "I don't mean to let any man spear me for nothing."

They were hidden by pretty good cover, for the rank bush-growth rose higher than their horses' heads.

Again the cry sounded; and now, as they peered eagerly back, along their own trail, they caught a glimpse of a tall savage gliding forward among the trees, and seeming to bristle with spears and sticks and war-shield.

"He 's after us!" whispered Hugh.

"Of course he is," replied Ned; "but what on earth is he stopping for?"

"He 's listening," said Hugh.

"Hear him!" exclaimed Ned. "That yell of his sounded like a crow's caw."

"There!" responded Hugh. "See that! He dodged it! See him parry those spears! Where do they come from?"

"There are more blackfellows! They are his enemies, and they are attacking him," replied Ned. "See!"

"Ka-kak-kia!" yelled the tall warrior, as he skilfully struck aside the missiles which came whizzing at him. "Ka-kak-kia!"

The whoop with which he accompanied his defiant utterance was terrific. He had shouted his own warrior name, with evidently no small degree of pride, precisely as if, instead of an Australian, he had been an American savage, an Apache or a Sioux.

The skill and quickness he exhibited were wonderful, for not a spear nor a stick hit him, and he was all the while re-

treating swiftly from tree to tree. He was followed in a similar manner by about a dozen black-men, very much like himself, whose discordant shouts rang through the forest.

Ka-kak-kia was compelled to keep his face all the while toward his noisy enemies, and he was continually threatening them with his long, slender spear, but he did not throw it. As he shook it at them, it trembled and vibrated, and so did the spears of the warriors opposed to him.

"Why don't they surround him?" said Hugh.

"They don't know how many other fellows of his tribe they might find in their way, if they should try," suggested Ned. "He does n't know just where we are, and I guess they don't know anything about us, or some of them would be coming this way."

"Then," said Hugh, "we might as well lie low, and let him draw them off."

There was very good sense in that; and so it happened that the two lost boys, in their perilous ambush, were watching a perfect illustration of native Australian warfare.

"FEROCIOUS FIGURES WERE NOW DARTING HITHER AND THITHER AMONG THE TREES."

CHAPTER V

A CAVE IN A TREE-TOP

HERE were already many anxious forebodings among the members of Sir Frederick Parry's picnic party in their riverside camp, and they were destined to further anxiety.

"Yip! Yip! Yip!" rang out again.

The racket now made by the long-legged, woolly dog sounded very much as if he were calling his own name, while he dashed in and out among the bushes.

"What can be the matter with him?" exclaimed Lady Parry, as she paused in pouring out a cup of coffee. "He is surely hunting for something. He may have found a trace of Hugh or Ned!"

A chorus of louder exclamations from the men responded to her, but none of them were on account of Hugh or Ned. At that very moment the black boy in the bushes was suddenly impelled to dart for the nearest tree and climb it, leaving all his sticks at the foot of it, for Yip had discovered him and, indeed, had barely missed preventing his climb.

In an instant more, the whole camp rang with shouts of men, cries of hounds, the braying of mules, and there was a frantic "Yip! Yip! Yip!" all around the roots of the short, stunted sapling, in the fork of which the young savage had perched.

"Blackfellows!" was the first, half-breathless remark of Sir Frederick. "Who'd have dreamed of it! Now, indeed, we may say we are in trouble!"

"Hugh! Hugh! Hugh!" exclaimed Lady Parry. "My boy! Lost in the woods, among the cannibals!"

"Oh, Aunt Maude! Poor Hugh!" mourned Helen Gordon. "And poor Ned Wentworth!"

"It 's bad luck," said Bob McCracken. "But we 'll get that one."

The black boy did not wish to be caught, but he had been imprudent. He had stared too long at that wonderful camp, and at that mysterious, brilliant dinner-table.

There was no such possibility left him as climbing into another tree from the one he was in, and there were the dogs; and then came the white men, shouting to him to come down. He could understand their motions, if not their words, and down he came, but that was all the good it did them. Not one word of English could they get out of him, not even after they had fed him with broiled fish and fried bacon. His big black eyes continued to dance from one to another of them, and at the dogs and the weapons, and other matters. He did speak, more than once, but what he said was all in his own strange, monotonous tongue.

"It 's all gibberish," remarked Bob McCracken; "but where there 's one of those fellows, you may be sure there are more of 'em not far away. We 'll all be speared, if we don't luk out, and then we 'll all be ate up. It 's the hard death to die, is that."

Sir Frederick himself was as keenly alarmed concerning savages as was any member of his party, but he said nothing. He hardly answered his wife, at first, when she spoke about Hugh and his peril. He was so silent, after he gave up questioning the black boy, that she almost lost patience with him.

"Frederick!" she exclaimed. "Why don't you say something. What shall we do?"

"Do?" he responded. "What are we to do? That is precisely what puzzles me!"

He meant that what they needed most was information; for the small captive savage was a very plain and direct suggestion of the nearness of parties of grown-up savages, just such as those which Hugh and Ned were at that hour trying to evade. Both parties of blacks were about six miles distant from the camp, although as yet they did not seem to know it.

As for Ned and Hugh, they were about as far away, and they were going farther at every step; but they had succeeded in putting only a mile and a half or so between them and the cabbage-palm prairie, where the kangaroos had fallen under the boomerangs.

The boys felt very sure that they had escaped being actually seen by the chief, or by any of his party, or by the enemies who were now pitching spears at him with their throw-sticks.

"Hugh," whispered Ned, as he cowered in the bushes, "oh! but can't he dodge?"

The tall black man was indeed dodging and parrying wonderfully well. His eyes were quick, his nerves were steady, his courage was dauntless; but then his foes were increasing in number. Fully a dozen ferocious figures were now darting hither and thither among the trees, throwing, or threatening to throw, their long javelins. They were all yelling almost incessantly, but one of them changed suddenly into a shrill whoop that sounded like a warning to the rest. Then he dropped to the ground. A spear hurled by an unseen hand had gone through his left shoulder.

A sudden cry of triumph burst from the lips of Ka-kak-kia. He felt as if he were rescued, for that spear told him he had drawn his enemies along until his friends had heard the noise and had come to help him.

The fight had really only just begun, to be sure, but now the first onset had for the moment ended.

"It was the cleverest thing I ever saw!" exclaimed Hugh, as he crouched watchfully under his bush.

"I 'd heard how they did it," said Ned; "but you or I 'd have been stuck full of spears in no time. That 's just what 'll happen to us yet, if they find out we 're here."

"Let 's push along," said Hugh. "I did n't dare to move hand or foot till now."

The hindmost of the black spearmen were disappearing among the trees, and it seemed almost safe for the boys to begin to lead their horses onward; but neither of them mounted until they had worked their way through the woods for about one more mile. They both looked and talked courageously enough, but they cast quick glances behind them.

They had not been followed, as yet, and for very good reasons. Ka-kak-kia's enemies did not know there were any "white fellows," young or old, to follow, and were thinking only of killing him. After his friends heard the noise and came to help him, both parties in the fight had quite enough to think of, and so Ned and Hugh were entirely safe for the time being — and no longer. It was therefore well for the boys that Ka-kak-kia had fallen into difficulties, but there had been no limit to the rage of his own squad of black hunters when the work he had left them at was interrupted. All five of them had obeyed his orders eagerly. They brought the two kangaroos in from the prairie to the very spot from which Ned and Hugh had watched the throwing of the boomerangs. One of them carried, among his collection of sticks, a long piece of wood which smoked a little and which smelled very badly. It was split at one end, and the split contained a bunch of leaves. While the others were skinning a kangaroo (for there was no time to dig a hole in the ground and roast it

in their usual way), this warrior was whirling that stick swiftly around his head with one hand, and picking up bits of dry wood and bark and moss with the other. Suddenly a tongue of fire sprang out among the bunch of leaves in the split; for it was a "fire-stick," such as the black-men carry on all their expeditions. In a moment more, the heap of dry fragments which he had gathered had been puffed and fanned into a blaze.

The fire danced up merrily, and the pleasant odor of kangaroo venison was soon spread through the hot December air, when suddenly they all turned their heads toward the forest, as if startled.

To the ears of a white man there would have been only silence, or that hum of insects, the murmur of the forest, which is almost silence; but to their quicker senses there came an audible warning. Faint and far away at first, but drawing rapidly nearer, were the sounds of the skirmish between Ka-kak-kia and his pursuers. It was a dreadful thing to have to drop cookery and kangaroo-meat, and to pick up spears, and throw-sticks, and shields, and waddy-clubs, and tomahawks, and boomerangs, but there was no help for it. Each man stuck down his twig of meat so that it would cook while he was gone, caught up his heap of weapons, and darted away into the forest.

If there was reluctance to leave the fire, there was also cunning and caution in the manner of their advance toward the skirmish-line. The nearer they arrived, the clearer grew the shouts and yells, but the more silent they became;

and more like snakes in the grass, or crouching, creeping, wild animals, did they push on. They might possibly have continued to keep still until Ka-kak-kia could retreat among them, if it had not been for a rash forward rush made by one of the enemy. He made the mistake of displaying himself, and instantly the short, withered fellow who had scouted through the grass to find the boys, stepped out from behind a tree, and quivered a spear in the socket of his throw-stick. Then it sped. Down went the too reckless foeman, and all the secrecy of the arrival of Ka-kak-kia's friends vanished in a wild storm of savage outcries on both sides.

There was no attempt made by either party at a hand-to-hand encounter. One side knew that it was altogether too weak in numbers, and wanted to get away, while the other did not know how large a majority it had, and was afraid to risk too much. So the queer skirmish of insulting shouts, and fierce gestures, and brandished spears raged among the trunks and bushes and underbrush until a mile and a half had been slowly traversed. Nearly half the distance had been covered before the speared warrior fell. After that spears and clubs went back and forth, and were in a manner exchanged; but both sides were experts in parrying, and nobody seemed to be hurt. There were, indeed, a few cuts and bruises here and there, but nothing that an Australian savage would consider worth noticing. Even the speared man seemed to care very little for the wound in his shoulder after the weapon had

been broken off and pulled out. It was doubtless unpleasant to be disabled, but the shoulder would heal up again, and the man be as ready as ever to throw spears and dodge and parry. His friends felt as he did about it, and wasted no sympathy upon him.

Back, back, carefully concealing their real number, the smaller body fought and retreated toward their fire. Around the blaze the five sticks still stood, each holding out a steak, by this time well done and ready to be eaten.

Both parties of blacks could now smell the fragrance from that wild cookery, for a light breeze wafted it into the woods, and they all fought the harder and yelled the louder. They shook their spears more furiously, and hurled them farther.

The skirmish, which had so unexpectedly begun with the first appearance of Ka-kak-kia on the trail, had now risen to the dignity of a great battle for a hot dinner; but the table chances looked dark for the hunters who had actually stalked and killed the two kangaroos. They were forced to give ground, although none of them were as yet seriously harmed, but they were exchanging signals with each other. The short fellow who had acted as scout slipped back and began to cut and tear fresh meat. He gave a shout which may have meant "all ready! Say nothing!"—for his comrades instantly sprang back to join him. Each black savage grasped a cook-stick, at the fire, meat and all, and another chunk of kangaroo, and

they all darted away together across the prairie, toward the cabbage-palm, so quickly that their assailants were taken by surprise. They hesitated, for it might be a cunningly laid trap. They wasted more than a minute of precious time in dodging cautiously forward from tree to tree, and when they did make a desperate charge toward the fire, it was too late for them to capture anything more than the fire and the very large, freshly killed kangaroo left behind, untouched, by Ka-kak-kia's fellows. That, however, was precisely such a war-prize as suited them just then better than anything else. Anybody, black or white, whom they might otherwise have chased and speared, was entirely safe so long as an uneaten morsel of that kangaroo should remain.

Meanwhile no one knew anything about the red-bearded cave-man. Yet he was a very important member of the meager population of that forest. He was, indeed, entirely unaware that there was any other population except such as might be following him through the mountains. He was as yet several miles away from his cave-home, and was plodding steadily nearer, but Nig was giving tokens that he had traveled far under a pretty heavy load. Just now, however, the cave-man seemed to be thinking about finding some halting-place.

"They are after me," he said aloud, "and not far behind now. The robbers! What would n't they do to get Nig's pack. They sha'n't get it, though. Not an ounce of it. I don't care to have to shoot any of them, but

they ought to be shot. They are coming; I feel sure of it!"

Then he studied the trees near him, seeming to recognize certain marks upon some of them.

"I 'm pretty close to it now," he said. "I 'll beat them this time"; and a few minutes later he exclaimed, "Here it is!"

It was not another tree, but a swift, deep-looking stream of water, and he halted upon its bank. Off came the burden from the horse. The first part of it was a great cowhide, strung together at the edges with thongs, so as to make a pannier of it. It came down upon the grass, and was quickly ripped open. It had been a remarkably heavy pannier; much heavier than one strong man could lift. Its contents were a number of small bags, some of leather and some of canvas. He picked them up, one after another, and carefully dropped them into the water, a few feet out from the bank.

"It is only about two feet deep," he said, "but it will hide them."

As soon as this secret work was completed, he took off Nig's saddle and bridle, and led him some distance into the woods.

"I 've got to move quickly," he said. "They are close behind me. There it is. Now!"

This time, what he was looking for and had found was a large tree, the upper half of which had somehow been knocked off, so that a vast stump was left, more than fifty

feet high. At that elevation, moreover, its branches were enormous, and it seemed to send them out all the more widely because of having no higher "top" to feed and carry.

Saddle, and bridle, and rifle, and some other things were made into a pack, and that pack was securely fastened to one end of the same long, braided rope-cord with which he had pulled up his water-pail and lassoed the ostrich-like emu at the ledge near his cave. He put a stone at the other end, this time, instead of a noose; and then he skilfully threw that stone over one of the lower branches of the tremendous tree-stump.

"That 's safe," he said. "I can haul them up. Come, Nig, old fellow!"

The horse, which had carried him and his treasure so well, had now enjoyed a long drink of water. He had thrown off much of his over-wearied appearance, and was busy nibbling grass. The bare feet of the cave-man left no mark, but Nig's hoofs did, when the horse was taken by the forelock and led away from the foot of the stump. He did not have to go far before he was turned loose and left to himself.

"There, Nig," said his master, "you may take care of yourself for a while. I hope they won't steal you, but I suppose I have only a few minutes to spare, now."

Not far from the spot where he parted from his horse there hung a ragged and tangled but strong-looking kind of vine, dangling down from the limb of a tree, and he ran to it at once. He must have been a sailor or a monkey, or else he had taken lessons from sailors or monkeys—or from blackfellows. He clambered up that swinging vine with a swiftness which proved the strength of his arms. Once in the tree, he went from branch to branch with an agility like that of the black boy who was now a prisoner in Sir Frederick's camp.

There were dangerous feats to be performed, at perilous heights from the earth, before the cave-man was able to swing himself upon a projecting bough of the great stump. In another minute he was astride of the branch which had caught and held his rope-cord, and he was pulling up his precious package, rifle and all.

"I 'm safe enough, now," he exclaimed, as he clambered cautiously back with it to the huge remnant of the tree-trunk. "They won't guess that I am up here."

The summit of the stump was somewhat rotten, as well as broken off, and there was a hollow there more than six feet wide, and nearly as many deep. It was a capital place for a koala, or an eagle, or a runaway savage to make a hidden nest in. The cave-man was neither the one nor the other, but there he sat, peering over the edge, when no less

"THE CAVE-MAN SAT THERE, PEERING OVER THE EDGE, WHEN SIX MEN ON HORSEBACK RODE UP."

than six men on horseback rode up. As they came along, they seemed to be searching watchfully in all directions. They halted at the foot of the stump.

"His trail is plain," remarked one of them.

"These hoof-marks are fresh," replied another. "They lead along here. He is n't far away, now."

"We 've got him!" exclaimed a third.

The tracks of Nig's heavy hoofs did indeed lead away from that tree, and on pushed the six horsemen; but in a minute or so they broke out into a chorus of astonished and angry exclamations. They had found the saddleless quadruped, feeding contentedly, while the master and his precious burden had mysteriously vanished. The clear trail which they had followed so far and so hopefully had at last run out; and back they came, bewildered, arguing, perspiring, to the foot of the stump. There they all dismounted and sat down.

"His hidin'-place is n't far from this, anyhow," remarked one of them. "He has quit his horse."

"Just so," said another, "and he can't get away from us. But what has he done with his nuggets?"

"They 're somewhere nigh to this," said a third, confidently. "We 're all right, boys. Let 's take a good rest, and eat something. All the stuff he washed out of his placer-gulch is just waiting for us to hunt it up and take it."

They all said more or less about being tired and hungry. A fire was quickly kindled, and a kettle put upon it, in a way that showed how accustomed they were to camping in

the woods. More than half a hundred feet above their heads, the cave-man looked cautiously over, now and then, and he even chuckled almost aloud as he made remarks to himself concerning the perfect security of the manner in which he had hidden the heavy bags.

That part of the Australian bush was becoming somewhat peopled, although not exactly "settled." The area within which all its known inhabitants, black and white, savage and civilized, had been gathered, was very narrow, however—a mere patch in the great wilderness. They were near together, but were very much in the dark about one another. They might actually meet on the morrow, and every heart among them was beating with hope, or with dread, concerning that possible meeting.

CHAPTER VI

THE ESCAPE OF THE COFFEE-POT

HERE were several very extraordinary picnics at the same hour and in the same forest. They were only a few miles apart from each other, but no one party knew anything about the others.

Perhaps the top and the bottom of human society were fairly represented around the camp-fires of Sir Frederick Parry and of the black chief Ka-kak-kia.

For a long time Hugh and Ned had been only too ready for supper, but it was getting late before they dared take the risk of halting to cook. They had mounted their horses, after setting out from the scene of the skirmish, but it would not do to ride fast, for heat and thirst and travel were telling upon the poor animals. The boys felt a pretty strong assurance that they were not being pursued, just now, and that they would not be until after the rival bands of blackfellows should have completely settled whatever difficulties there might be between them.

"I wish they 'd exterminate each other," said Ned, as they rode along.

"That 's what they 'd like to do," said Hugh.

The more they thought and talked about savages, the more they also thought and talked about the excursion party from "the Grampians," and of the danger into which it was likely to fall. The great, gloomy forest seemed to grow darker, as they shivered over the cruel idea of an attack by cannibals upon the camp they had left. They felt blue and tired, and almost sick at heart.

At that moment Ned's horse uttered a low, faint whinny.

Hugh's horse replied to him a little more loudly, and they both walked onward with a quickened movement.

"I say, Ned," exclaimed Hugh, "do you suppose a horse could really sniff water, if we were getting near it?"

"I 've heard that they could," said Ned. "Maybe it is so. Hark! Hurrah! Do you hear that?"

The sound which the boys now heard was a pleasant, musical murmur into which the roar of heavily falling water dwindled on being sifted and softened through a half mile of forest. Ned and Hugh were, indeed, going farther from the camp of Sir Frederick Parry with every step, but, at the same time, they were drawing nearer to a great bend of the same stream in which he had caught his fish.

The forest grew more open as the eager animals hurried forward; and the sound of the falling water became more distinct. It was not long before the boys broke out into husky cheers, that were followed by expressions of wonder.

The mighty torrent plunged down a precipice of nearly a hundred feet, broken half-way by a projecting ledge, so that the water reached the tumbling pool below in a great storm of foam. There was a capital place, at the level edge of the great swirl, for a horse to put down his head, or for a boy to dip a cup, and they all made directly for that spot.

"Now," remarked Hugh, "I don't believe the blackfellows are after us. Let 's make a fire and have supper."

Ned was already looking around and picking up dry wood. There was plenty of it. In a few minutes a fire was blazing, not far from the pool, and the tired horses, unsaddled, were picking at the grass, while their masters were broiling slices of fat and tender kangaroo vension.

Dinner, or supper, was over in the camp of Sir Frederick Parry, a few miles further down stream, and there was not one happy person in that camp.

The white people were unhappy because: they did not know where they were; they did not know what had become of Ned and Hugh; they knew there were savages in the woods, and were uncertain what to do next.

The black boy was unhappy; chiefly because he was tied to a sapling near the water's edge, for fear he might get away and tell older blackfellows about the camp.

Yip and the other dogs were uneasy concerning the black boy, and they came frequently, as if to make sure that he was there.

"He cannot get away while they are watching him," said Sir Frederick.

"Of course he can't, sir," replied Bob McCracken, confidently.

But he had been tied by white men, and he was a bush-boy. He seemed to be quiet enough, except his eyes, which were dancing in all directions. There came a moment, however, when his quick glances told him that no other eyes were upon him. He must already have been working at his cord fetters, for in a twinkling he was down flat upon the grass.

"Yip! Yip! Yip!" yelped the large, woolly dog, a few seconds later, as he came bounding across from the other side of the camp, followed by the two hounds.

"Where is that black boy?" suddenly shouted Marsh, the mule-driver.

"Where is he?" echoed Sir Frederick. "You don't mean he is loose?"

"He 's gone!" roared Bob.

"Oh, dear me!" exclaimed Lady Parry. "Now they will all know we are here! They will find the boys, too!"

"Aunt Maude!" said Helen, "we must hunt for them till we find them!"

There was a general rush to the spot where the black boy had been tied, but he was not there, and Yip and the hounds were snuffing furiously along the bank of the river.

"He 's not in the water, sir," said Bob, as he and the rest stared eagerly out at every bubble on the surface.

There were not many bubbles to be seen, but a large tuft of grass and green leaves was floating down stream, not many yards below.

Sir Frederick dashed on along the bank, followed by his dogs and men, but they saw no sign of any swimmer. They knew that even a black boy would have to come up to breathe; that is, if he were really under the water.

He did not have to come up to breathe, however, because he was up all the while, breathing as usual, but with grass over his face, just as all his people breathe when they swim out to catch black swans and other waterfowl by the legs and pull them under. The tuft of grass floated down until the dogs and men went away beyond it, and then it came ashore in some bushes. Soon, while the search along the bank continued, a poor little black boy, robbed by rich white men of his club and spear and all his other sticks, darted swiftly away into the forest.

Ka-kak-kia and his five friends, across the prairie beyond the tall cabbage-palm, were compelled to finish their dinner too quickly for comfort. But they knew, as well as if they had seen it, what the other band of blackfellows were doing. They knew they were roasting the other kangaroo, and it helped them decide what they themselves ought to do. While their enemies were roasting and eating so large a kangaroo, there would be time for them to escape entirely, and to follow the two horses and the two white fellows from whose trail their chief had been driven. They

picked up their sticks and went off through the woods. They avoided the prairie, making a circuit around it; and before dark the short, thin, ugly-headed fellow, who had played scout at the beginning, uttered a sharp, fierce yell. He had found the hoof-marks of the horses, and Ned and Hugh once more had black enemies on their trail.

The bearded cave-man did not have any dinner to eat. He had nothing to do but to sit in the hollow of the big stump, and be patient.

It was a very remarkable hollow. Upon a more critical examination it showed proofs of having been partly scooped out by human hands. Fires had burned in it. There were even a few scattered bones, to prove that meat had been cooked by its occupants. There was really hiding-room in it for half a dozen men, if they did not mind being crowded somewhat when it was time for sleeping. Its present tenant showed no signs of being sleepy, but rather of an intention to sit up all night.

The six men who were camped at the foot of the tree had not come upon so long an errand without making very complete provision for it. They did not intend to starve, if the loads carried by two led horses would feed them. They made coffee and they fried bacon, and they ate, and all the while they chatted freely concerning what they expected to find.

"You see, boys," said the man they called Jim, "a runaway convict dares n't ever show his face again. Besides,

this chap 's done a heap of things to answer for since he took to the bush."

"Nobody 'll ever care what we do to him," remarked the man they called Bill.

"He had washed all the dust out of that gulch, though," said Jim; "and he won't ever come back to it."

"That 's so," said another; "but we know he 's carried away all his nuggets out here. All we 've got to do is to find them. We did make one pretty good haul out of his pile already."

"Come on, boys," exclaimed Bill, getting up as if that thought started him. "We can cast around a good deal before dark, and we can begin again fresh to-morrow."

They consulted for a minute or so as to how they should search, and then scattered among the woods in several directions.

"They have gone a-hunting after me, have they?" said the man in the tree up above them. "They are going to rob me, are they? Well, now, I 'll see about that. Meanwhile I want some coffee."

The searchers were already out of sight, and they had left their big tin coffee-pot, more than half full, standing before the fire. There it stood, simmering pleasantly, and sending up a steamy odor of coffee to mingle with the resinous, balmy breath which pervaded the woods. It was now almost dark.

Something like a very long and slender and flexible vine came gently swinging down through the sultry air. This

ropy thread drooped gently, and swung slowly back and forth until a noose at the end of it took in the comfortable coffee-pot, just under its nose and handle.

"I 've got it!" came in a sharp whisper from a form that reached out over the topmost edge of the stump. "I 've got it!"

The noose drew tight, and the coffee-pot arose as if it had been a kind of tin bird without wings; it swung upward, swiftly, steadily, silently, until it reached the place from which that exultant whisper had come. Then it was grasped by the hand of the cave-man, and in half a minute more he was safe in his hollow, drinking hot coffee out of a small tin cup which had hung at his belt.

"Good!" he said. "I wish I could fish up some of their bacon and hardtack, but I can't. I 'll keep the coffee-pot and carry it home. Mine is about used up. There they come!"

The approach of dusk had put an end to the search, and the six rascals were making their way back to their camp.

Suddenly one of them exclaimed:

"Hullo! Boys, what 's become o' the coffee-pot?"

Then five astonished voices, on all sides of him, inquired: "Why, where is it?"

High in the deepening darkness above them a man, peering over the edge of a tree-hollow, took a long, refreshing draft from a steaming tin cup, and said to himself, with a chuckle:

"It has walked away, coffee and all, you villains! Don't you wish you may get it again?"

Suddenly one of the men exclaimed:

"Blackfellows! Nobody else could ha' crep' in and taken it!"

"Blackfellows? We 'll all be speared if we don't keep a sharp lookout!"

They talked it over with occasional shivers, as they mentioned spears and boomerangs; but when their talk was over their conclusion came from Jim.

"Boys," he said, "our only show is to shoot 'em if we find 'em."

All six agreed to that, but the man in the tree said to himself:

"The worst thing they could do! Just like their sort, though. Anyhow, I can't stay here; and it 's dangerous climbing in the dark. I 'll try it before the fire goes out."

There was as yet a good blaze, sending its glow quite a distance. Any one near the fire could not see far into the forest, but one out in the gloom could profit by the fire-light. The bearded cave-man now had his rifle slung at his back, so that his hands were free. His coil of rope-cord was hung over the rifle, and he crept slowly, carefully, out of his hiding-place, along the tree-limb.

"This is risky!" he muttered. "Sure death if I miss my hold, sure death if they catch a glimpse of me! I wish they 'd made their camp somewhere else. Then I could wait until morning."

As it was, there seemed to be no help for it. On he crept, until that bough became small and began to bend.

What if it should break? He had no help from the firelight, just there, and he groped anxiously out in the dark.

"I 've got it!" he said. "Careful, now,—here goes!" and soon he was on a limb of another tree, and it was also bending.

It was a fearful undertaking, but he reached the trunk of that tree and went out on a limb in the opposite direction.

"This 'll do," he muttered; "I won't try another change of trees. It can't be more than thirty or forty feet to the ground. The rest is easy."

It seemed to be so to him, but it might have been difficult for most men. All he did was to seat himself firmly in a loop that he made at one end of the rope; put the rest of the rope over to the other side of the limb he was on, and gripe it hard; swing off and let himself down, hand over hand; reach the ground, and pull down the rope that remained. It was a regular sailor's-hitch performance, precisely as if that limb had been a yard of a ship. It landed him still dangerously near to the camp at the stump, where five men were now lying down while one was pacing slowly around as a sentinel.

Silently and swiftly the cave-man made his way from tree to tree, still guided for some time by the firelight. Here and there, as he groped his course, the forest was open enough for him to see the stars and the moonlight in the tree-tops.

"The stars tell me very nearly which way I 'm going," he said to himself.

The five men who were lying on the ground around the stump were as yet as wide awake as was their sentinel. Every now and then, one of them said something to his mates about coffee-pots, convicts, bushrangers, police, gold nuggets, wild blackfellows, boomerangs, and other matters, which seemed to be keeping him from going to sleep.

Ned Wentworth and Hugh Parry had not been lucky enough to secure a coffee-pot, and they were not where they could borrow one from any neighbor. In fact, they did not know that they had any neighbors.

"I wish I knew how that fight ended," said Hugh, "and what those blackfellows did afterward."

"They could n't all have been killed," replied Ned, as he put more wood on the fire. "I guess, though, they all had so much fight that they won't follow us in the dark. Sha'n't we keep watch, one at a time?"

"Of course," said Hugh. "I 'll watch half the night, and then I 'll wake you and you can watch the other half."

"Sailor watches are better than that," said Ned. "It 's nearly eight o'clock now. I 'll keep guard till ten, then you watch till twelve. That will give us two-hour naps."

"All right," declared Hugh, and down he lay, just as if he expected to go to sleep; but his eyes remained wide open.

Two hours went by. The roar of the water began to have something drowsy in it. Ned sat at the foot of a tree with his double-barreled gun in his lap, and Hugh may have been almost dreaming. The fire had burned low. All

seemed dull, still, peaceful, and safe, when suddenly both of the boys sprang to their feet, exclaiming:

"What 's that?"

"Ready, Hugh!" sang out Ned. "Ready with your gun. Here they come!"

"Ready!" shouted Hugh. "Stand your ground, Ned! We must fight!"

"'READY!' SHOUTED HUGH. 'STAND YOUR GROUND, NED! WE MUST FIGHT!'"

CHAPTER VII

THE GRAND CORROBOREE

HE roar of the surf on the shore of the ocean, after the ears of a listener have become accustomed to it, does not seem to interfere greatly with other sounds which are different from it. The roar of a waterfall is much like that of the surf, and Ned and Hugh had become so accustomed to it that they could talk and hear almost as well as if it had not been there. So when they heard through the darkness of the forest an altogether distinct sound, it brought them to their feet, ready for action. It was natural that their first words should be: "The black cannibals! They are here!"

Hugh had been lulled almost into slumber by the monotonous song of the waterfall. Ned had been half dozing at the foot of a tree, barely awake enough to begin to guess that it must be almost time to change watches with Hugh.

His eyes had opened suddenly, and he was conscious that he was listening to something. "It sounded like the breaking of a stick!" he said to himself. "What is it?"

From the night shadows two human eyes were staring at him and Hugh and the fire.

"They are two boys!" whispered a voice. "How could they ever have come here? They seem to be alone. Well, if those six villains knew it, they would rob them. This is a strange piece of business!"

Just before that, he had made a forward step, and had trodden, full weight, upon a dry, brittle branch of a tree. It had broken with a sharp, loud snap, and that was the noise which had startled the boys. He was now standing still and stroking his long, bushy, red beard.

"I must warn them," he said to himself; "but it may be the end of me. Perhaps I can get across the mountains again, and hide somewhere else. It is sure death to me, if I am taken."

He was almost afraid of doing a good action, for fear it might betray him to his enemies. He seemed to fear danger from every human being, good or bad.

He remained perfectly cool and calm about it, but suddenly he turned his head quickly, as if he too were listening as intently as was Ned Wentworth.

"What 's that?" he exclaimed. "Can it be possible? They are coming this way! Now I 've got to go right in, or be torn to pieces. This is horrible!"

For just a moment he stood still.

Thud, thud, crash, crash,— a great, rushing sound, accompanied by loud, fierce cries, came through the forest. Whatever it might mean, the boys had their guns leveled, ready

to defend themselves. Meanwhile the noise grew louder and nearer.

"Hugh," said Ned, "they 're coming!"

"Stand your ground, Ned!" said Hugh.

"Boys," shouted a deep voice out of the darkness, "get close to the fire. That 's your only chance. I 'm coming there, too. The fire! Quick!"

"Ned —" began Hugh, but he was cut short there, for a great, dim, blurred form bounded from the shadows and flashed past him with a long, flying leap that carried it clear over the fire.

Hugh stood motionless, but Ned was more wide awake. Still, it was almost by instinct that his gun came up to his shoulder and was discharged at that startling phantom. Over and over the creature rolled upon the ground, while another and then another followed it.

"Don't shoot again, boys! Stand close by the fire. Those are kangaroos! And now come the dingoes! Hear that?"

"Dingoes, Ned! They are wild dogs!" shouted Hugh, as he obeyed the warning. "They won't come near a fire. Oh, I 'm glad it 's a good blaze!"

"You may be thankful," said the deep, warning voice, as its owner came striding in and stood beside them. "There they come! I 've lived in these woods a long time, but I never before knew of dingoes running kangaroos at night."

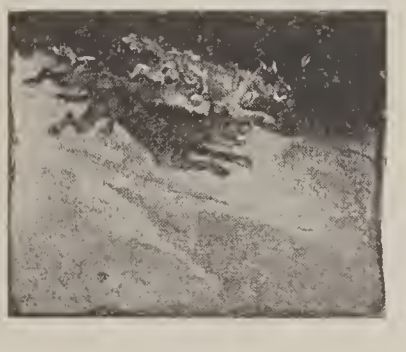
"I 've known them to kill hundreds of sheep at night, upon our place," said Hugh. "That 's their time. I think they get their kangaroo mutton whenever they can."

"I should n't wonder if they did, only I never saw it. What a pack!" exclaimed the stranger. Then, remembering that he had not said a word as to who he was, he turned to Ned and remarked suddenly, "You never saw me before. My name 's Beard."

"Beard?" said Ned. "My name is Wentworth. And this is Hugh Parry."

"I know," said Beard, looking keenly at Hugh; "son of Sir Frederick Parry, of 'the Grampians.' Look at those dingoes! There 's enough of them to tear down a dozen men!"

The forest seemed to be full of gleaming eyes, white teeth, snapping jaws, fierce yells and snarls, as the dingoes dashed around, hither and thither, longing to rush in upon the three human beings and the fallen kangaroo, but in wild-beast fear of the glowing camp-fire.



"Heap up the fire," said Beard. "We must keep it blazing. They won't stay here. Some of the pack went right on after the other kangaroos. Don't waste any ammunition on dingoes. It 's precious stuff, out here."

The barking wild dogs circled around the camp again and again, and then, as if with one accord, they gave it up, and the sound of their cries died away in the depths of the woods. Beard was right, however. No such regiment of dingoes had been heard of before.

As for Ka-kak-kia and his five comrades, they had not traveled far after finding the trail which they intended to follow next morning, and they were now sound asleep among the bushes.

The larger band of blackfellows had been in a different state of mind as to the best way of spending an evening. It had been a great thing for them to capture so very large and fat a kangaroo as the one which was now cooking in their deep, fire-heaped oven-hole. As soon as he was done he would make a splendid barbecue, with which to celebrate their victory over Ka-kak-kia.

It was not a great while before they began to rake away the fire and pry out the roast.

They ate it all, taking plenty of time and dividing fairly. Even the speared warrior ate well. The darkness came upon them before their meal was over, but their fire had not been permitted to burn low. It was heaped and heaped, for it was to be the central point of a grand "palti," or "corroboree" dance, to be performed in the most complete manner, before taking a war-hunt after Ka-kak-kia and his followers.

One of them must have had with him a bag of white ocher, and the kangaroo they had roasted had supplied grease enough to turn it into paint. They were all of them corroboree artists, and knew how to smear lines of white along their ribs and limbs, so that each black form suggested the outlines of a bleached skeleton. Time was consumed by the work of decoration, but at last they were

ready for the dance. With their "wirri" or waddy-clubs in hand, upon beginning, and afterward with spears, shields, and other sticks, successively, around and around the roaring bonfire, which they had piled up with resinous wood, the hideous figures pranced, and danced, and whirled to the time of a wild, monotonous chant.

Then the dance changed, and one by one they bounded, and gesticulated, and boasted, and whooped, and brandished their weapons, looking very much like so many skeletons capering between the firelight and the darkness. The wonder was, how they could caper so long and yell so loudly, after having eaten so much kangaroo, of which, indeed, nothing but the picked bones remained.

It was very late when the corroboree ended, and at the hour when the black, skeleton-painted savages gave it up and lay down to sleep off their fatigue, an absolute contrast to this barbaric scene was presented by the camp of Sir Frederick Parry, on the bank of the swift river.

Two white tents had been pitched—one for Sir Frederick and Lady Maude, and one for Helen Gordon. Another tent-cover lay on the grass; but it had not been set up, for it belonged to the absent boys and was not now needed. Marsh, the mule-driver, lay sound asleep on a blanket near the spot where his mules were hitched. Bob McCracken also lay asleep on a blanket, just inside of the line, to which he had carefully fastened the halter of every horse in the camp. On one side of him lay a rifle, and on the other a gun, and he had his boots on. As for Sir Frederick's other

"HE SAT BY THE FIRE AND COOKED FOR HIMSELF SLICE AFTER SLICE OF KANGAROO-MEAT."

men, Keets must have been asleep in the wagon, but Brand was awake and on his feet, walking slowly, steadily all around the camp as a sentinel. He had a gun on his shoulder, a revolver in his belt, and his eyes were all the while busy, as if he expected somebody.

The two hounds lay under the wagon; the fire burned well; the horses and mules stamped now and then; while Yip walked around behind the sentinel, sniffing, whining, yawning, as if he were still uneasy.

Ned and Hugh did not feel at all like going to sleep again, after having been stirred up in such a manner. As soon as the excitement about the wild dogs subsided a little, they began to stare hard at the man Beard. He was far more unexpected out there in the bush than were wolves or kangaroos. He was as little expected as the blackfellows.

The boys' presence was as great a surprise to him, and he said so.

"How on earth did you get away out here?" he asked; and they told him, very freely, while he sat by the fire and cooked for himself slice after slice of kangaroo-meat, like a man who was very hungry.

"He 's a tremendous fellow," whispered Hugh to Ned. "He must be a bushranger, and a desperate sort of chap!"

"He seems good-natured enough," whispered Ned. "He looks as if he might be as strong as a horse."

"I think he is," said Hugh.

"Who did you say were in Sir Frederick's party?" Beard asked them. "Tell me again."

He seemed to be talking like a man half awake, or in a sort of dream; but Hugh repeated the names, one by one.

"Helen Gordon?" said Beard. "Any relation to the Gordons of Falcon Hall, in Yorkshire?"

"That 's where they lived once," said Hugh. "My grandfather does n't keep up the hall now. He has leased it. My mother was his only daughter. Uncle Robert 's in India, in the army—"

"Your mother was Maude Gordon? Your cousin Helen is a daughter of Robert Gordon?" asked Beard.

"Yes," said Hugh, thinking it odd to be questioned about his family by a wild, red-bearded fellow, there in the wilderness.

"And they 're lost? Lost in the bush—and you are, too?" asked Beard, as if he needed to say something.

"We 've lost them, anyhow," said Ned, breaking in. "We don't know which way to turn to find them."

"Tell me again about the blackfellows," said Beard, turning his face once more full upon them. It was strangely flushed, and it looked very red in the firelight.

Ned Wentworth had hardly had a chance to talk up to that moment, and it was his turn. He told all there was to tell up to the beginning of the skirmish, but there he was interrupted.

"Ka-kak-kia?" exclaimed Beard. "I know him. He 's a friend of mine. He and his fellows would n't be half so

likely to kill me as the others would. A blackfellow will kill anybody, though, if he thinks he can gain anything by it. You can't trust them. Well, what with white savages and black savages, and dingoes, these woods are full of wolves!"

"The dingoes were killing sheep at 'the Grampians' when we came away," said Hugh; "but we did n't think of finding any blackfellows or bushrangers out here. Father said they were all gone."

"They 're not, then," said Beard, in a hoarse, rasping voice. "There are six of the worst white villains camped within three miles of this very spot! They 'll be here after us in the morning. If they found your father's camp, they 'd be more dangerous than blackfellows."

"They would n't attack it, would they?" exclaimed Hugh, springing up in sudden dismay. "What? Attack my father, and mother, and Helen?"

"I 'm afraid so; and lay it to the blackfellows, or to me, if it should ever be discovered. But they would n't leave a trace of it, with the river close by to hide everything in. I know them. They 'd assert that I did it. They 've done that sort of thing before."

All that Hugh and Ned could do was to look at each other and draw long breaths of fear and grief. It was a dreadful state of affairs, and the man Beard put his head down on his folded arms and sat still for fully a minute.

"Boys," said he at last, looking up, "we must n't be near this fire after daylight; but we can lie down for a while

now. You 'll all get safely out. Promise me one thing, on your word of honor."

"We 'll promise," said Hugh.

"I 'll promise anything that I ought," said Ned. "What is it?"

"If I get you safe back to your own camp, promise not to say that you met me. You may tell your father and your mother, in confidence, but you are not to tell anybody else."

They promised solemnly.

"I have got to get out of this region, anyhow," said Beard; "but I don't want anybody to know even that I 've been here."

He was evidently a very queer fellow. He was roughly clad, wild, savage, desperate-looking, but there was something gentle and kindly in the way he spoke. His eyes were bloodshot, and his voice was hoarse, and now and then he showed his strong, white teeth. He said very little more, but he made the boys lie down, telling them to go to sleep, if they could, and there he sat and looked at the fire, with his repeating-rifle in his lap.

"Ned," said Hugh, as they stretched out on their blankets under a tree, "do you believe you can sleep?"

"It seems as if I could n't do anything else," said Ned. "If I don't, I won't be worth a cent to-morrow."

Sleep will come to over-tired boys, even if they try to keep their eyes open. So it was that neither of them heard the man Beard muttering, after a while, there by the fire:

"So it is Hugh Gordon Parry!—and Maude, and Helen Gordon! Well, my time has come. What on earth made them all come out here to be speared or clubbed in the bush! No, I can save them! I *will* save them, no matter what becomes of me!"

CHAPTER VIII

LOST!

SIR FREDERICK PARRY'S camp was astir at daylight the next morning. As soon as there was light enough to cast a line, the baronet himself was fishing from the rock by the water's edge, and was having fair success, although none of the fish were large. He was evidently depressed, and he paid no attention to the preparations for breakfast going on at a little distance behind him. The fire was blazing vigorously; the camp table was already spread with its white cloth, its bright cutlery, its silver, and its china. There was also a stir in the tents, and before long Lady Parry came out of one of them, and Helen Gordon out of the other. Both were looking pale, and as if they had not rested well.

"Oh, Aunt Maude," said Helen, "I had such awful dreams about Hugh and Ned! I feel as if I could find them myself."

"Poor child!" exclaimed Lady Parry. "You look pale and ill. Yes, we must find them, and I hope we shall find them to-day."

Helen tried to speak again, but her voice seemed to fail her, and she turned away. In another moment her aunt was at the water-side, exclaiming: "Fred, where do you think the boys are? We must find them!"

"My dear," he replied consolingly, "no doubt we shall find them. As to getting home, all we have to do is to follow this river down. We will start as soon as we find the boys."

"Frederick," she said, "if anything has happened to them, I —"

Her voice thrilled and trembled with suffering, and there was so much anguish in her face that Sir Frederick turned away his gaze and replied:

"Immediately after breakfast we will all search for them"—and just there he hooked a fish, and had an excuse for not saying anything more.

Nevertheless, the day's work of the people in that camp was already cut out for them; and so too for the other parties wandering in that forest.

The black boy, in the shelter of a tuft of weeds, awoke as early as Bob McCracken among his horses. The boy had no breakfast to get, nor had he anything to get one with, for the wicked white men had robbed him of all his hunting-sticks. He was not discouraged, however, for he seemed to have a definite idea of the direction he should take to find his people.

The camp of blackfellows that he set out to find with

such a remarkable degree of energy, did not contain his mother or aunts or sisters, for it was a camp of warriors and hunters, and it had left all womankind in a place so far away that sheep-farmers, like the owner of "the Grampians," naturally supposed that no savages were likely to trouble them.

The corroboree dancers must have been fatigued, for they had danced long and late; but for all that they were stirring at the first dawn of light. They built up their fire, although there was not a mouthful of anything left for them to cook for breakfast, and neither was there any water for them to drink; but they did not seem at all disturbed by that. Soon after waking, they were searching among the trees for a "grass" or "blackboy" tree,—what white men would have called a "blue-gum" tree, or "eucalyptus."

They found several, some old and some young; but they chose the latter. Each man began to dig with one of his sticks at about four or five feet from the foot of one of those trees. He dug down until he came to a main root, with fresh, succulent branches shooting from it. He cut off a shoot, split it, and began to chew it, getting water from it as if it had been a slice of watermelon, and soon there were no thirsty blackfellows in that party. As for eating, they had done well enough the day before. Their next movement was to sit down in a circle and hold a kind of jabber-talk that did not last long. They pointed at the cabbage-

palm and across the prairie, and shook their heads. Ka-kak-kia and his friends would not be so unwise as to stay there and be speared. They had gone surely, and the corroboree dancers all said so; and they were entirely correct. The chief and his five followers knew that they would be hunted after, and they also intended to hunt for other people, and so all their sticks were picked up about as early as they could be seen, and their owners were already pushing on cautiously through the forest, in a line that indicated they intended to visit the white boys' camp at the waterfall. If that were so, however, they were likely to find there a deserted camp, for not a man in all that bush was on his feet earlier than was Beard, the cave-man, and he at once awoke his young companions.

Ned and Hugh had slept well, with an idea that they were under a sort of protection; but they sprang to their feet promptly when they were stirred up. Then they each looked very hard at Beard, as if they were anxious to see what sort of man he might be by daylight.

It was not quite daylight yet, but they got an idea of a very powerful, very rugged, wild-looking man, with as gloomy a face as they had ever seen. His voice, when he spoke to them, was very deep, but it was kindly enough.

"We must have breakfast directly," he said. "There is no time to spare."

"Do you think the blackfellows will follow us?" asked Ned.

"There is no doubt of it," said Beard. "They 're too stupid and obstinate to give up anything. They 'll follow a party for weeks, when they 've once begun the pursuit."

"Mr. Beard," said Hugh, "how many kangaroos there are in this forest!"

"Yes," said Beard. "As soon as the blacks were driven off, there was nobody to hunt 'em, and so their number increased. That 's what brings the blackfellows back again, and it brings the dingoes too."

"I wonder if the big flocks of sheep don't partly account for there being more dingoes," said Hugh, soberly. "I never thought of that."

"Other men have," said Beard. "Wild animals have to eat something. The dingoes would disappear if they could not find food."

He talked freely about anything and everything that lived in the woods; but every time either of them said or asked anything about himself, he evaded the question completely, and they could learn nothing concerning him.

"The blackfellows may be after us," remarked Ned, "but they will have some distance to travel."

"The white savages have n't far to go," replied Beard. "I 'm more afraid of them. I 'm going to put you into a safe hiding-place for a while, and then I 'm going to scout and see what they 're about. I don't want you to be speared or shot while I 'm away."

"I quite agree with you," said Hugh; "but we must find our camp."

"Don't worry," replied Beard. "Let us get away from here first."

The horses being quickly saddled, the boys mounted and set out. They took all their game with them, as they might need it for food.

The six white rascals who had camped at the foot of the great stump were also astir early. While they were eating breakfast, however, they watched carefully the woods around them, and talked about blackfellows and coffee-pots. Not one of them had the least idea that the lost coffee-pot was at that moment resting quietly within the hollow of the enormous trunk beside them.

"Tell ye what, boys," said Bill, at the end of a long discussion, "we have n't come away out here for nothing this time. We sha'n't really run against any blackfellows. They 're shy of such a party as this is. They 've cleared out. We 've got to git that fellow's nuggets, though,—cost what it may!"

They decided to hunt on foot, in couples, and not to get so far apart from one another that one couple could not hear a signal-call from the next.

"We 'll find him, sure," said Jim. "He 's built himself a cabin of some sort to live in, somewhere round here. I reckon it was a pretty safe place, too, till we tracked him."

They set out upon their thieving scout at just about the time when Beard halted and said to Ned and Hugh:

"Here we are, boys!"

They had traveled several miles, and the morning was well advanced.

"Now we will hide the saddles and bridles," he added; "and we can put the horses where we can find them again. I 'll show you how to do that."

Ned and Hugh hated the thought of giving up their horses, but their estimate of the danger they were in had been growing all the way, and they dismounted. The saddles and bridles were easily disposed of by hanging them upon a scrubby sapling among some rocks tangled over with vines and bushes. The horses were led across a flat, bare ledge, on which their hoofs left no mark, to a wide, grassy open, where they were picketed by Beard, to feed until they should be wanted.

"Now, my friends," said he, "come right along. I am going to show you a secret that you must keep."

"I wish somebody would show us our camp. Oh, for a sight of father and mother and Helen!" said Hugh.

"I think I can find that easily," said Beard, "as soon as the woods are clear. Your mother would wish you to come in alive, though. I can tell you that."

It was a serious warning, and yet the great shadowy forest around them looked peaceful enough, in spite of all its wolves, four-footed or two-footed, white or black.

There was one part of that forest where, at that time, a great deal was occurring within a small space. The great towering trees—palms, and gum-trees, and other kinds—were so scattered as to make it appear almost open and

sunny. It was very beautiful, but it was a deceitful beauty that concealed many dangers. Here and there were lines and clumps of bushes and undergrowth, that divided the open forest spaces into glades and lanes and green vistas which branched into and away from one another.

Along one of these green vistas rode a man with head bent forward, as if he were absorbed in deep thought. It was Sir Frederick.

"Lost!" he exclaimed at last. "To think of Ned and Hugh lost in the bush!—to die there of hunger and thirst, or to be killed by black cannibals! It is horrible!"

Then he raised his head and looked around him for a moment.

"Maude!" he called. "Come this way! You should not wander so far, my dear. Helen!"

No answer came, and again he called; and then his face grew suddenly pale.

"Where are they?" he exclaimed. "In which direction have I been riding? Where is my wife? Helen! Are they lost? Am I lost?" and putting his hand to his mouth, he gave a long, half-tremulous, and alarmed "Coo-ee-e! Coo-ee-e! Coo-ee-e!" He ceased, and once more his head bent forward, almost down to his horse's mane.

Sounds do not travel far among tree-trunks, bushes, undergrowth, and broken ridges of rough ground. It was not far to where a lady on a bay horse was leaning over, at that very moment, to free the skirt of her flowing riding-habit from a branch of thorn.

As she once more sat erect, she glanced around her.

"Frederick!" she exclaimed; and after another moment of silence she added, in tones of increasing excitement, "Where is he? He was in sight only a minute or so ago. Fred! Am I lost—lost in the bush? Frederick!"

Full, loud, frantically clear was that last cry for help; but Lady Maude Parry was mistaken. It had been fully five minutes since she had seen her husband or niece, and they had been galloping in different directions among those deceptive forest avenues.

At the end of one of these, at the base of a rugged ledge of rocks, a fair-haired girl reined in a graceful, spirited white pony.

"Uncle Fred and Aunt Maude will catch up with me in a moment," she said. "We can't hunt for Ned and Hugh any farther in this direction. And yet it would be terrible to go back to camp without them."

She wheeled her pony as she spoke, and he made only a few bounds forward before he was again reined in, and Helen looked rapidly around her.

"They 're all the same," she said uneasily. "One glade is just like another. Which of them did I come by? If I should ride around I might lose myself. They 'll come."

She waited, while her pretty face put on an anxious expression.

"Aunt Maude! Uncle Fred!" she shouted, half weeping. "Why don't you come? It all looks alike. I don't know which way to turn!"

She did not dream that almost at that same moment her uncle was leaning very despairingly over his horse, nor that her aunt had lost her way in the maze of trees; but Helen's face put on an ashy paleness as she turned it upward. Her lips were moving, too, but there was no sound to be heard, and all around her was the awful silence of the endless Australian forest.

Thus they remained for a while, so very near to each other and yet so separated, each afraid to move for fear of going farther away, and each growing sick at heart as the sense of helpless loneliness crept over them.

In another direction, less than two miles distant, a man rode excitedly into an open place, a camp by a little river, shouting:

"Boys, mount again! I 've lost track of them! Sir Frederick and Lady Parry and Miss Helen! They 're out in the bush!"

Three other men sprang into their saddles, shouting to each other and to the dogs; and in a moment more the camp was left in charge of some spare horses and six mules, while its keepers dashed away into the woods. Not one of them, however, went in the right direction to find any of the missing persons.

Sir Frederick Parry was a man of firm nerves. He was a cool man and brave, and now he reined in his horse and reasoned calmly:

"I can't sit still here," he said. "I will try to go back along my own tracks. There, I can see the hoof-marks if I

ride slowly. The worst of it is that a blackfellow may see them better than I can! I *must* find them!"

His wife also was riding onward, but she was not looking for any trail. She was trying to guess her way, and every now and then she sent out a plaintive "Coo-ee-e!"

Again,—again,—again,—and each time she paused and listened, painfully; but no answer came back to her from the leafy silence. Lady Maude burst into a fit of weeping that made her tremble from head to foot.

Helen was only so far away that she could not hear, and she, too, attempted, time after time, to shout "Coo-e-ee"; but it seemed to her as if her husky, frightened voice could hardly have startled a bird that she saw rise from a wide-branching tree beyond her.

"No one could hear it," she said to herself. "Even if there were blackfellows in the woods, they could not hear such a weak little call. They would not know I am here. How horrible it would be to see one of them!"

She seemed to find relief also in urging her pretty pony to a brisk gallop that carried her farther yet from the friends who were looking for her, and for whom she was so earnestly searching.

"HELEN, TOO, ATTEMPTED, TIME AFTER TIME, TO SHOUT 'COO-EE-E.'"

CHAPTER IX

THE LITTLE VOLCANO

HE first to escape from doubts and difficulties, that morning, was the little blackfellow; for he found the spot where his friends had eaten their barbecue and danced their corroboree. He also found some kangaroo bones, but more important to him were half a dozen of the gum-tree roots, for he was thirsty.

All his anxiety was now gone, for he could follow the trail of the party. He at once set out vigorously, and it was well for him that his tremendous budget of news did not weigh anything.

Perhaps the next to discover something new were the pair of white boys. They had been wondering, for half a mile, at Beard's easy strength as he strode along under the weight of a big kangaroo upon his shoulder. At length he put it down upon the grass, and remarked, "Here we are, boys. We are safe now. I 'll put you into my house, and shut the door after you, and then even blackfellows can't find you."

"It 's the biggest tree I ever saw, but I don't see any house," Ned remarked.

"It 's the biggest house you ever saw, too," said Beard, "and the deepest cellar, and highest and steepest roof. It will hold plenty of people, too, after they once get in. But the front door 's a little narrow. Wait until you see the back door, though."

Hugh stared up at the dizzy height of the tree and searched among the rocks and bushes.

"Where is the door?" he asked.

"Can't you see it?" said Beard. "Follow me, and I 'll unlock it for you."

He led them a few steps farther through the bushes, and they found themselves in a hollow between two gnarled roots of the tree. Behind and over them was a dense green cover of vines and branches and tall weeds; and in front of them was the rugged face of the bark, with a large flat stone leaning against it.

Beard moved the stone, took out a wide piece of bark, and then they saw a hole.

"That 's the door," said Beard. "I 'll go in and you follow me. Then I 'll come out and bring in this kangaroo, and go back after the other. Then I can close up the house."

He crept in on all fours.

"I carry my things in on my back," he said,—"game, and coal, and wood, and everything. I have to go some distance for my coal."

Hugh went down on all fours and followed Beard. Ned imitated them. They did not say a word until Beard remarked:

"There, boys, I 've found a torch. Have you matches? Give me one." In a moment more there was a blaze, and they began to see about them.

"Hugh," exclaimed Ned, "look at the stalactites and stalagmites! It is a cave, and like some we have in America. What a splendid house to live in."

"Did n't I tell you so?" said Beard, "and it 's the biggest house you ever saw. When I was here last, I brought in heaps and heaps of wood and coal, chiefly because I 'd nothing else to do. We 'll light a fire in the fireplace, and then we 'll go and hang the meat in my refrigerator, so that it will keep. If we don't, it 'll spoil soon in this hot December weather."

"Your refrigerator?" said Hugh. "Oh, is n't this jolly! Come on, Ned, I want to see the cave."

Beard went back after the kangaroos, and before his return they had plenty of time to kindle the fire in the fireplace he had pointed out, and then to examine all the splendid whiteness. They had very little to say. There was so much of it to see that they could not pick out the right words to tell how it looked. They piled wood upon the fire, excusing themselves by promising they would bring in more for him, and every fresh knot which kindled brightly showed them something new and beautiful.

"Now, boys," said Beard, when he came back, "you shall

see the refrigerator, and then I 'll go out and scout a little. Pick up that rope and bring it with you. Take the torch, too. Go ahead, Ned."

Ned walked on in advance, carrying the torch, in the direction of a mysterious crash and roar they had been puzzling over ever since they entered the cave.

"I 've read about such things," said Ned, as Beard explained the chasm and the torrent. "They seem to have them in all the big caves. I wonder if there are any fish in this one. Sometimes there are blind fish."

"I never tried for any fish," said Beard; "but if you hang meat far down in the depths there, it will almost freeze. There 's always a draft of air and a spray of water, making a continual evaporation. It 's a regular freezing process."

Beard slung the kangaroo carefully over the edge, and let it down.

"There," said he, "I 'll go back for the other. We must n't waste any provisions."

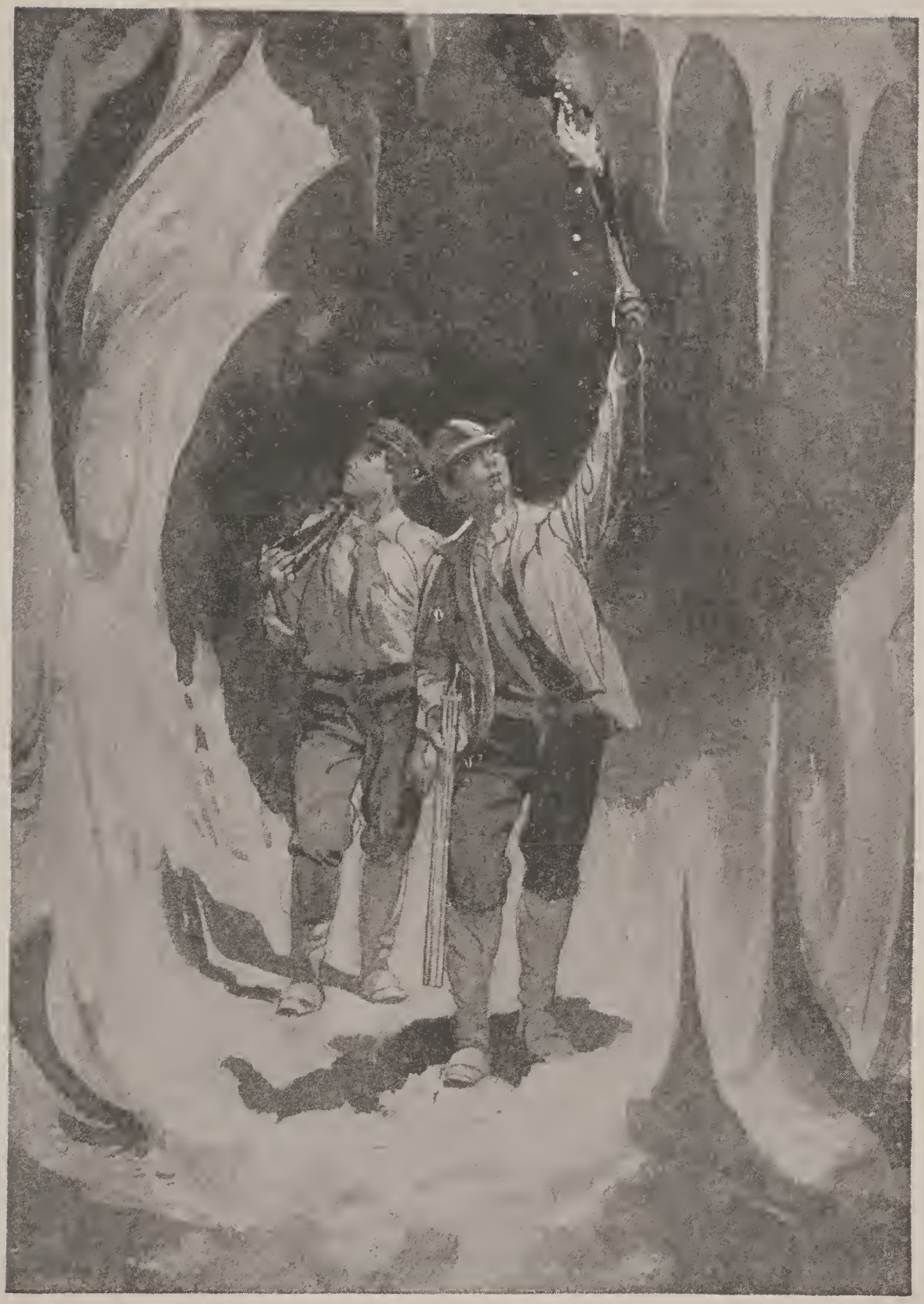
He was not long in returning with his second load.

"Boys," he remarked, as he put it down, "we were only just in time. I heard one of those land-pirates 'coo-ee-e' just as I was picking up the kangaroo."

"What do you mean by 'pirates'?" asked Ned.

"Land-pirates," replied Beard with emphasis. "They may be old convicts, but I don't know. They are robbers, anyhow, of the worst kind."

"We 've had any number of our sheep stolen," said Hugh, "but not from the pastures that extend this way."



THE BOYS EXPLORE THE WHITE CAVE.

"This way?" exclaimed Beard. "Why, you are nowhere near any of your land. You could n't get back to the edge of it in three days' travel, if you did your best."

"This makes seven days since we came out,— a whole week!" said Hugh. "Oh, if I only knew where the rest of the party are!"

"I 'll find them for you," said Beard; "but I want two or three of Ka-kak-kia's blackfellows to help me, if I can get them."

"Can you trust them?" asked Ned.

"Trust them? No!" replied Beard, promptly. "But they 'll do anything for plenty to eat and drink; and if your party is strong, they will be afraid of it. I don't know how it is, but I 've been safe among them, year after year. That is — pretty safe. They try to kill me, every now and then; and after they fail we make up."

"They are a queer people," said Ned.

"They are not like any other," said Beard. "But we will hang this second kangaroo in the refrigerator, and then I 'll go out and see what those fellows are doing."

The game was attended to, and then the boys followed him almost to his front door as he went out.

"You stay right here," said Beard, as he left them, "unless I am gone too long. I won't be long, unless something happens to me."

The boys felt they were wonderfully well hidden. Nobody, except Beard, knew where they were. In fact, their party did not know just where they themselves were.

The six men who had lost their coffee-pot, and were hunting Beard and his nuggets, threaded the woods, occasionally coo-ee-e-ing to each other, to keep from getting too widely separated. At last one pair of them stumbled upon so sudden a surprise that the shouts they gave made the woods ring. Not many minutes later, all six had collected around the remains of the boys' deserted camp-fire, and were staring at the marks upon the ground, and at the waterfall.

"Boys," said Jim, "he 's got somebody with him,— fellows with boots on. He was barefooted himself. Now we 've got to move carefully." The man called Bill remarked:

"What beats me is, who can it be that 's with him? Why, he dares n't go into any settlement — he 'd be hung as sure as they caught him. That 's what makes it safe for us to go after him."

"We 'll track him right along now, anyway," said Jim. "We 've struck his trail."

And that very moment there were morning visitors in the camp which the robbers had left unguarded, at the foot of the great stump, for Ka-kak-kia and his five followers had stumbled upon something entirely unexpected in their search among the woods. They were looking for a pair of white fellows, and now, instead of them, they had discovered the trails of three times as many other white fellows and of a lot of horses. Slowly and cautiously did the black hunters work their way in. But immediately after they

discovered that the camp was unguarded, they were gathered around its smoldering fire. They jabbered for a few minutes, and then, as if with one accord, they became silent, for they had decided what to do. Horses they did not want, and there was little else to take, excepting a kettle, two frying-pans, some blankets, and the provisions. Beard's six enemies were not men who would bring a needless article with them, even if they had owned one. The blackfellows themselves, expecting to be pursued, took only what they could handily carry. They made short work of it, and then seemed to vanish, so suddenly did they slip away. Meanwhile the white robbers finished their visit to the camp by the waterfall, and once more pushed on, following the trail of the horses. They moved silently and with caution, feeling sure that their prey was at hand. They passed the jungle in which Beard had hidden the saddles and bridles, to the point where the hoof-marks ceased upon the rocky level. Here they turned and went up the rugged hillside, expecting every moment to discover some sign of a human habitation.

"Boys!" suddenly exclaimed Bill. "Lie low! See the smoke!"

"Smoke?" exclaimed his companions, and they hid themselves.

"That must be from his fire," said Jim. "He 's there. We 've got him this time—nuggets and all!"

They worked their way forward with watchful, feverish eagerness. There was indeed a column of blue smoke aris-

ing above the ledges ahead of them, and there must needs be a fire; and a fire must be a sure tell-tale of the hands which kindled it.

They were by no means in error. Nevertheless, they drew nearer and nearer to that smoke cloud without discovering any chimney.

"He must be there, somewhere," said one of them, as he stealthily looked out from behind a shattered boulder. "I can't see any sign of a cabin, though. Hullo!"

He stepped out and walked forward, followed by his party, all with their eyes and mouths opening in wonder.

"Volcany!" exclaimed Bill. "Did you know there was any volcanies round here? I never heard of any."

"It 's a volcano!" said another. "No mistake about that."

"Smells like pine-wood, too," said Jim. "It 's a pitch-burnin' volcano. I 've heard tell of such."

The smoke came hotly up through a crevice in one of the ledges. It seemed to be carried by a strong draft, as if through a natural chimney.

"I say, boys," remarked Jim, "when I first saw that smoke, I was just sure we 'd found his house."

They stood around that puzzle, and then they gave it up, and climbed down again to take another hunt for the lost trail. They had a great deal to say about volcanoes, as they went, until they changed the subject, and then they spoke of big trees. Several declared that they had seen taller trees than one they were approaching. Then

each added that he was n't quite sure, and he 'd take a closer look at it.

They went closer, and they looked, and wondered, and they argued about what they had done and were going to do.

The bushes at the foot of the tree were thick, and made a good place for six warm, tired men to sit down and talk. It was shady, and just behind them there was a curious crack in the bark of the tree, between two of its roots, and behind the crack there were two faint whispers.

"Hush-sh, Hugh! It is lucky we did n't try to get out any sooner."

"Listen, Ned! We can find out all about them. Hear that?"

Hugh and Ned heard the conclusion of their conference.

"Come on, boys," said Jim. "We 're on the right track, anyhow. Let 's go back to camp and get our horses and truck, and then make another search here. He is n't far away, now. We can settle the two fellers with him easy enough."

Ned and Hugh nudged each other as they heard that. The others agreed with Jim. Then they arose and walked away.

After they were at a safe distance, the bark door opened entirely, and the two boys crept out.

"Hugh," said Ned, "I 'm glad to see daylight again. I just could n't stay cooped up there any longer!"

"It did seem an awful long time," said Hugh. "I wish

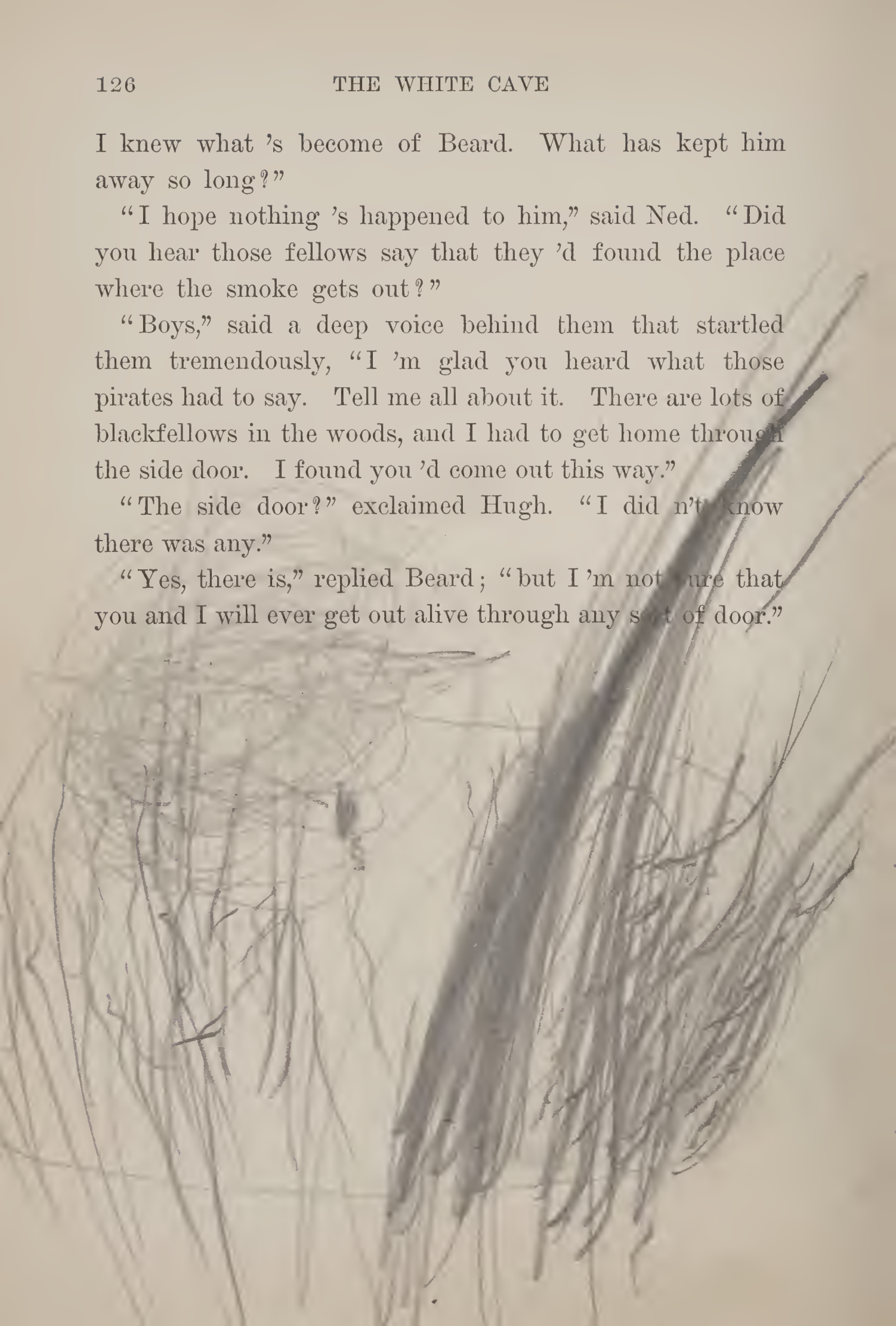
I knew what 's become of Beard. What has kept him away so long?"

"I hope nothing 's happened to him," said Ned. "Did you hear those fellows say that they 'd found the place where the smoke gets out?"

"Boys," said a deep voice behind them that startled them tremendously, "I 'm glad you heard what those pirates had to say. Tell me all about it. There are lots of blackfellows in the woods, and I had to get home through the side door. I found you 'd come out this way."

"The side door?" exclaimed Hugh. "I did n't know there was any."

"Yes, there is," replied Beard; "but I 'm not sure that you and I will ever get out alive through any sort of door."



CHAPTER X

A SPEAR AND A BUCKSHOT

IR FREDERICK PARRY was an exceedingly prosperous man. He was a baronet; a gentleman of high rank; educated; accomplished; very good-looking. He owned estates in England, and he had a fine sheep-farm in Australia, with a remarkable farm-house in the middle of it. But he was also a wretchedly miserable person. He was pale at one moment and very red-faced the next, as his thoughts came and went; and he was savagely out of temper all the time.

"It is of no use!" he muttered hoarsely. "I 'm too sick at heart to coo-ee-e any more. Where can my wife be?"

At that moment something flashed closely past his head, making a buzzing sound as it went; but it was not an insect nor a bird, and the baronet spurred his horse forward with a quick, fierce exclamation.

"A spear!" he exclaimed. "The blackfellows!"

No second spear followed, and Sir Frederick drew his rein hard, as he looked back and saw a gaunt, black shape

bounding along among the trees. The baronet had a shot-gun with him, and he must have been accustomed to shooting from the saddle, for up it came to his shoulder. Out rang a loud report, and a shower of buckshot pattered sharply all around the bounding blackfellow.

"It was long range," said Sir Frederick, "and they scattered; but I touched him."

For the savage had dropped upon the ground, and was holding up one of his feet to look at it. A solitary buck-shot, nearly spent, had struck a little above the big-toe joint. It was not at all a dangerous hurt, but for a while there could be no more bounding or fast running upon that foot. The blackfellow rubbed the foot, and chattered angrily as he did so. Sir Frederick watched him for a moment, but did not lift his gun again.

"I hope that will be enough," he said, as he once more rode forward.

The necessity of keeping a lookout for spears and other missiles gave him something to occupy his mind. He carefully reloaded his gun. "If they follow me," he said, "they may be less likely to find Maude."

In another part of the forest, his wife was wandering aimlessly. She was very pale, and her horse looked as if she must have ridden rapidly in her fruitless efforts to find her husband. She herself took notice of his condition, and in a moment more she halted him.

"He ought to have water," she said. "I 've been almost

cruel to him. I 'll dismount and let him rest, if I can find a place that looks safe."

It was not difficult to pick out a grassy hollow bordered by dense thickets, and Lady Parry dismounted. She gathered up the long skirt of her riding-habit, and walked on for a few paces, and then suddenly sank upon the ground between two of the bushes.

"Blackfellows!" she whispered. "Oh, I hope they have n't seen me!"

They had not seen her, because they were gazing intently in another direction. They were stealthily moving away from her, for they had passed through the very thicket where she was now lying.

"Poor Helen!" she murmured, as she looked out at the receding forms of the blackfellows. "I hope she has found her way back into the camp."

Helen Gordon's light-footed pony had only carried her farther and farther away from it, in zigzag paths that were but bewildered wanderings.

"I 'm so thirsty," she said at last; "and Nap must be as thirsty as I am. Where can we be! Oh, if I could see somebody!"

It was only a minute or so before her lips opened again, and this time it was in almost joyful exclamation.

"The river!" she shouted. "We can drink, and the camp can't be far away. Hurrah!"

She dismounted, stooped, and drank from her hand until her thirst was gone. Then she led her pony to the

water's edge. All the while, however, a thoughtful shadow overcast her face.

"The camp is on the bank of the river," she said. "That 's sure; but am I above it or below it? Ought I to go up-stream or down-stream? I have n't the least idea; and if I go wrong, I shall only be riding further away. What shall I do?"

She sat down in the shade of a tree to think, while Nap found a very good dinner for himself growing all around him.

Beard stood with the boys under the great tree. He made them repeat to him all they had overheard.

"Volcano?" he said, half laughing. "It 's all right, though. The smoke goes out there, but it can't tell tales that will do any harm. They can't get in by that way, and they can't find any other, unless we get careless and help them. I think very likely they have found your old camp by the waterfall, and have gone back there. It 's a good spot for a camp."

"Mr. Beard," exclaimed Hugh, "I hardly know in what direction that is from here. Where does that river run to, from that place? What 's the nearest road to it from here?"

"Where does it run to?" replied the cave-man. "Why, it wanders off among the mountains, I don't know where. It runs all around this mountain. You can reach it that

way, below, as well as by going back to the waterfall. Your father's party must be somewhere below there."

"I wish I could find them," said Hugh.

"We must be careful," said Beard. "We 're in a bend of the river, with the mountains behind us, in the bend, and the forest in front of us. We 're sure that your father is n't up-stream."

"How?" asked Hugh. "I 'm all mixed up. How are we sure?"

"Because," said Beard, "water does n't run up-hill. 'The Grampians' is lower than this mountain country. He has n't crossed the water, and he has n't crossed the mountain-range. There 's only one pass through the range, and it 's the one those robbers followed. We 'll eat dinner now; and then I 'm going to scout up toward their camp and know what they 're doing. This will be an exciting day, if I 'm not mistaken. Don't you feel hungry?"

They crept quickly in; Beard followed and closed the door behind him, and in a few minutes more the infant volcano, away up at the chimney-top on the mountain-side, was puffing smoke at a great rate.

Beard seemed disposed to eat very rapidly, as if he had important work before him. Soon he said:

"I must know what they 're doing. When you go out, shut up the door tightly and don't go far. Keep under cover, too."

"All right," said Ned, as the cave-man picked up his rifle and strode away.

"Ned," asked Hugh, "do you know any more about all that geography than you did before he explained it?"

"Not much," said Ned, thoughtfully. "I know there 's a bend in the river and another in the mountain, and the cave is in the bend, and the river does n't run up-stream."

"That 's all I know," said Hugh. "It 's mixed; but here we are, and he says that father's camp must be below, and he thinks he can find it. I hope he can."

"He means to try it to-night, if he finds the woods clear enough," said Ned, holding out another chop to the fire.

No sooner had the white rascals regained their camp, than they saw something was wrong.

"Boys!" shouted Jim, the instant he walked in and looked around him. "Somebody 's been here!"

"The horses are all right," shouted a man who had gone to look for them.

"Horses!" exclaimed another. "We can't eat horses! Where 's the bacon?"

The bacon was hunted after in vain, and so were other articles upon which they had relied for dinner. They soon gave up trying to express their feelings about it.

"We 've got to find that fellow, and find him right away," said Jim; "but first we must change camp, and then hunt game or starve."

"No, we won't," said Bill. "We kin ketch fish. We won't starve. We 'll git the nuggets, too, if we 're not speared by the blackfellows."

"The blackfellows will never come near such a crowd as this, if we keep together," said another man confidently.

But even as he spoke, a pair of dark, searching eyes were watching him through a tangle of thick vines, and Ka-kak-kia was remarking in his own tongue:

"Too many rifles. Kill blackfellows by day. Can't kill so well with rifles after dark. Wait till night. Then blackfellows have a chance to spear them." He said something more about waddy-clubs and their uses, but he lay very still while the white fellows saddled their horses and mounted, and dolefully rode away.

Bob McCracken, and the other men belonging to the camp of Sir Frederick Parry, rode into it again to cook and eat their dinner; but they were a crestfallen company, and even the horses they dismounted from had a jaded look. So had Yip and the two hounds.

"There 's no use denying it," said Bob, as he poured out four cups of the coffee he had made, "Sir Frederick 's lost himself, just as those two young fellers lost themselves, and her leddyship 's gone off and lost herself, and whether she 's got the young leddy with her or Sir Frederick, there 's no telling."

"Bob," groaned Marsh, the driver of the mule-team, "we 're as much lost as any of 'em — excepting that we 've got enough to eat and drink."

"You 're not a leddy!" exclaimed Bob. "Think of that! Don't I wish her leddyship and Miss Helen had a cup of this coffee!"

It was a curious time; so many different parties dodging around in those woods, each group of persons ignorant of where the others were, and of what they were doing.

"Ned," said Hugh, as soon as they had finished their dinner, "I 'm puzzled about that side door; where is it, and how did he get in?"

"We 'd be likely to get lost in the cave, or to break our necks, if we tried to find out," said Ned. "Let 's do as he said, and go out and look around."

Hugh agreed to that, and they started; but both found much to say about the wonders of the place they were in.

"Beard must have been burrowing like a woodchuck, when he found it," remarked Ned, as he crept out into the open air.

"I can't guess how he did it," replied Hugh; and then he turned to fit the bark slab into its place.

They had an idea of the direction in which Beard had gone, and they quickly decided about their own.

"We can't stay here, doing nothing," said Ned; "and we might find some of our folks. Let 's each take a separate track. We must n't go too far, and we can be back in an hour or so. Beard may be here by that time. What do you say?"

"All right," said Hugh. "But remember what he said about keeping well under cover. I 'll go this way."

So the American boy slipped away in one direction, and the English boy in another, each with his heart beating, his fingers tingling, and his eyes watching keenly every sight and sound of the luxuriant "bush" around him.

Two or three miles beyond them, there was a very remarkable meeting at about that hour. A tall blackfellow, with a handful of sticks, was limping along painfully on his left foot, to which something had happened, when there came running to catch up with him a black boy who had picked up an old dried branch for the sake of having a stick to carry.

No white man could have understood the quick rattle of hard words which followed; but the man was the boy's father, and they were both intensely interested.

All the while the wounded father limped onward. Fast walking was impossible, however, and at last he consented to sit down, while his son and heir (heir to all the sticks he owned) once more pushed forward, alone, to tell his story to the other blackfellows—and a very proud boy was he.

They, at least, would soon have news concerning other people, and perhaps they would know what to do with it; but the four white fellows in Sir Frederick's camp grew more and more troubled over the sad fact that they had no news whatever.

They sat around and rested for a while after dinner, and let their horses crop the grass; but at last Bob McCracken sprang to his feet, exclaiming loudly, "I can't stay here! Call the dogs, and we will go out for another hunt after Sir Frederick and the leddies."

Every man of them shouted a ready assent, and they called the dogs. "Yip, Yip! Pomp! Cæsar!" They called and called, but there was no response. They searched all around the camp, but not a dog was to be found, and the four men stood still at last, and looked at one another.

"I 've heard of such things," groaned Marsh. "The blackfellows have stolen 'em!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Bob. "It 's that dog Yip. He 's scented something, and he 's led off the two hounds to hunt it up. He 'll get them all lost in the woods — and what 'll Sir Frederick say to that?"

"I don't know," said Brand. "He set great store by those dogs. It 's no fault of ours, anyhow."

Yip and the hounds had indeed seemed to hold a conference after eating dinner. They had then gone to the river and lapped water. They had listened to the talk of the four men, and they had whined and yawned, and Yip had barked once or twice. Then he had worried hither and thither in the outskirts of the camp for some minutes, and had given a small, suppressed yelp. The hounds came to him at once, and when he trotted off into the woods, they followed him.

CHAPTER XI

A GREAT WRESTLING-MATCH

HE six land-pirates had not failed to bring hooks and lines with them into the woods. Rods were easily cut among the bushes, and grubs served for bait. There is sometimes good fun in fishing, but these fishermen found no fun in their fishing. They had changed their camp from the old place by the stump, and no blackfellows had tried to hinder them. Now, however, the fish did not bite well; for it was the wrong time of day, and the prospect of food was poor. Besides, every fisherman felt like now and then turning his head, as if to see whether anybody were coming. It was not long before one of them laid down his rod and line, and arose, picking up his rifle.

"Boys," he said, "I don't lay claim to being a fisherman. There 'd better be one man on guard. I 'll patrol."

"Boys," added another, "he 's right. These are only small fish. You four go on a-fishin'. There ought to be two men on guard. It 's a dangerous neighborhood."

He would have thought so, indeed, if he could have seen a small, black, very bushy head which was just then pushing through some underbrush to look at him and his comrades. Once more the black boy had discovered something new.

His elders had been after Ka-kak-kia and his party, while he had been discovering the baronet, the ladies, and a whole excursion party, and now he had found a fishing-party. He even wasted much time in staring at it, so that his lame father ere long had almost caught up with him. He saw a few small fish caught. He saw the two patrols walking up and down, each carrying a rifle over his shoulder in a half-military way. He was watching one of them when a sort of shadow flitted by him. It went past, and it went up, in a whizzing whirl, and then it came pouncing down. He heard a peculiar low cry behind him, and he instantly began to creep away.

As for the patrol, a boomerang had struck him, and he fell to the earth, while his rifle went off with a loud report.

The other patrol turned and fired wildly into the bushes, shouting:

"Blackfellows!"

"Bill 's killed!" exclaimed Jim.

"No, I 'm not," growled the fallen man, as he sat up and rubbed his shoulder; "but the lock of my rifle 's broken. That thing hits hard."

The boomerang itself lay upon the ground, broken in two. But that the rifle served as a shield, the man Bill

would have been severely injured; and the whole party had received a dreadful warning.

"Boys," said Jim, "there 's bad luck for us in these 'ere woods. Who 'd have looked for blackfellows round here? We must get the nuggets, and then we must clear out of this, or we 'll all be speared."

No more boomerangs were thrown. The men were well acquainted with the wild men of those woods. They knew that a single boomerang, hurled in silence, with nothing following it, stood for the presence of one lurking blackfellow, who might have gone off after others, or who might not be heard of again. They had been through somewhat similar experiences before, and they had risked such things when they set out in chase of the man Beard. It was plain that they had lived lives of recklessness.

As for the black boy and his lame father, they were now creeping through the woods together, as if it took two to carry so much news and tidings so important.

Helen Gordon stood upon the bank of the river, and wondered whether to go up or down.

"Seems to me I must be below Uncle Fred's camp," she said to herself; "and it 's dreadfully rocky the other way. I 'd have to go out into the woods and go around, and I might miss finding the river again. How tired and hungry I am! Nap is tired, too. What shall I do?"

The words were hardly out of her lips before there came a kind of answer. She had never before heard such music!

Yip! Yip! Yip! came the clear, glad, joyous melody of one voice.

Yelp! Yelp! Yelp! was the reply of two other deeper voices. All three of them in chorus had but one interpretation:

"There she is! There 's Helen!"

In another moment the dogs were fawning about her, and she was trying to pet them all at once, calling them all the good names she could think of.

Then they went to the water's edge, lapped freely, and came back to lie down and pant; for they had been running long and hard, and were tired.

"I 'm so glad!" exclaimed Helen. "Now I know I can find my way back to the camp. I 'm afraid Aunt Maude and Uncle Fred will be worried about me." She never suspected that they, too, were lost.

It was just as well that the bushy cover where Aunt Maude was at that moment crouching had but one horse and one woman to hide. Two horses might have neighed to each other, or two women might have uttered exclamations. As it was, Lady Parry watched in silence a very lame blackfellow and a very active, urgent black boy who was hurrying him forward. The man carried a shield, boomerangs, and sticks, but the boy had only one poor, crooked stick, of no account.

She trembled, but even her horse nipped the grass in silence, and the black news-carriers were too much absorbed in their errand to notice her.

"THEN CAME THE REPORT OF A GUN."

"They 're gone!" she murmured at last. "But what am I to do? And where is my son?"

She rose and stood erect in a slight opening between two luxuriant bushes. She had deemed herself safe, for the lame blackfellow and his son had been gone for several minutes. Her intense feeling had obtained the mastery and she had spoken aloud, and as she rose she saw before her, not fifty yards away, one of the most awful figures that could be imagined. Tall, black, ferocious, terrific without any addition to his natural features, but now hideous with all the white skeleton-marks of his corroboree paint, a black warrior stood in an open space, balancing a long spear with his throw-stick, preparing for a deadly cast.

How that slender, serpent-like spear quivered as the savage poised it and shouted his exultant war-cry! How the harsh, discordant sound did grate and thrill upon her ears! But it was instantly followed by the most welcome sound in all the world.

"Mother!" was the call she heard from the thicket near by, and then came the double report of a gun, one barrel following the other quickly.

The spear dropped, and a long, dark form lay prone upon the grass; but neither Lady Maude nor Hugh saw it fall, or, for one long moment, thought of it.

"Mother!"

"Hugh!"

"Hide, Mother! Hide! Quick! There are more of them!"

"I know there are, Hugh! I've seen some of them. Get down!"

Down they crept behind the bushes, and rapid whispers, back and forth, told all the story that each had to tell.

Lady Maude had found Hugh, and it seemed to her that her troubles were nearly over. Hugh had found his mother, and it did not at once occur to him to doubt his ability to conduct her directly to his father's camp. The meeting was so unexpected that for some minutes neither thought of the black corroboree dancer.

"He 's gone, Hugh," said his mother; "but I 'm afraid there are others."

"I don't know, Mother," said Hugh. "I had to shoot quickly, or that savage would have killed you. I must put in fresh cartridges."

Lady Maude had little idea of the situation except that she felt safer. As for the cave and the other strange things Hugh had described, he might almost as well have repeated a page out of "Robinson Crusoe." It all sounded like so much fiction.

The report of a gun can be heard only a short distance through dense foliage. If those woods had been bare and desolate, as in wintry July weather, the report of Hugh's gun might have been heard by other ears; but as it was, it gave no warning.

The six land-pirates had fried and eaten some small fish. They believed themselves in danger only from blackfellows,

but they were not entirely correct. When the wounded blackfellow's boomerang fell upon Bill's rifle-lock and knocked him down, there was a low exclamation from a man concealed in a tuft of weeds on the crest of a ledge below the camp.

"Ugh!" he said. "That was well thrown. I hope it spoiled his rifle. They 'll have trouble enough now. I can go back to the cave and look after those boys."

He must have been listening and getting information, for he seemed to know that his enemies had lost their provisions, but were still determined to follow and plunder him.

"They 'll have a good time doing it now," he said, as he crept away. "Take it all in all, this is getting to be about the most tangled-up situation I ever saw. I wish the black and white savages would eat each other up, like the Kilkenny cats. My life is n't worth much, but I must see that those boys don't get hurt. No matter what becomes of me, I must save the others!"

He was on his feet now, and was walking rapidly homeward.

"Who 's that!"

He stood still as he uttered this exclamation, but he did not raise his rifle. He was looking forward, and he seemed under sudden and great excitement.

Right before him, at a little distance, under a tree stood a very fine horse, cropping the grass. Against the shoulder and saddle of that horse leaned a large well-dressed man with his head bowed upon his folded arms.

"Look out!" shouted Beard, and he sprang forward.

There had been another man very near. He had a club in one hand, and he was stepping lightly, stealthily forward. He was bony, muscular, and as black as ink. His face gleamed with savage triumph until he heard the fierce, angry shout with which Beard bounded upon him.

"Ka-kak-kia!" yelled the savage in defiance, and Beard himself just then shouted the same name. But it was too much for savage temper to be interrupted in that way, and Ka-kak-kia struck at Beard with the waddy he had been about to throw at the man by the horse.

The blow was parried skilfully, but it was not returned; and Beard let fall the rifle he had parried with, and gripped Ka-kak-kia by the arms. The man by the horse had raised his head, as if he were waking from a dream. Now he had turned and was staring at them as if stunned.

Ka-kak-kia hardly ceased for an instant to pour forth angry words, and he was answered as angrily by the cave-man. Meanwhile there was a wrestling-match of a very desperate sort, and an ordinary white man might have had the worst of it.

"What am I about?" suddenly exclaimed the man by the horse. "Don't give in! I 'll knock down that black-fellow!"

"No, Sir Frederick," gasped Beard. "Don't strike him. He 's a friend—of mine. I must throw him—without help—or he 'd lose his respect for me!"

"Humph!" exclaimed Sir Frederick. "But what if he throws *you?*"

"He can't," said Beard. "But—if he does—you must disable him at once! There,—he 's yielding,—there!"

It was a terrible grapple, but Ka-kak-kia had met his master.

Strain, tug, struggle as he would, the steady, resistless strength of Beard bent him over, threw him upon the grass, and then held him quiet and harmless, while he glared furiously at the victor.

"I must hold him until he gives up, Sir Frederick. Hand me that waddy."

The baronet obeyed as if he had been commanded by a superior officer; but he could only guess at the meaning of the native words which followed between Beard and the savage.

"He has promised to be quiet," said Beard at last, releasing him.

Ka-kak-kia arose somewhat sullenly.

"I told him," continued Beard, "that the woods were full of his tribe's enemies, that he and his people might all be speared, and that they were foolish to try to fight white fellows at the same time."

"Will he keep his promise?" asked Sir Frederick. "Is there any good in him?"

"Not a particle," said Beard. "He has a queer idea that he can't kill me, that 's all. You know very well that they

never keep a promise. Just now he is cowed, and he will be quiet for fear of your rifle and mine."

"Will you let him go?" asked Sir Frederick, doubtfully. "Is it safe?"

"Of course it is n't safe," replied Beard; "but then what is a fellow to do? They are men, after all, and I don't like the idea of needlessly killing them."

The baronet expressed his agreement with this sentiment, and then asked, "But who are you?"

"You may call me Beard. How did you happen to be away off here, alone?" said the cave-man, adding, as he turned to the savage, "Ka-kak-kia, go!" He added some words in the native tongue, and the wild man took his waddy and sprang away.

The answer made by Sir Frederick was given steadily, but in a voice full of suppressed pain. He told about his camp, and his missing party, and the lost boys, the cause of his losing himself that day. Beard listened, now and then nodding his head, and at last remarked:

"You are not lost, Sir Frederick. I could guide you to your camp by a bee-line, if it were safe. But we must get there as cautiously as we can manage it. Ned and Hugh are all right. They are at my house."

"Good!" said the excited baronet. "My son and his friend at your house? Now, if I knew where to find my wife and niece!"

"We shall find them," said Beard. "The worst of it is that there are two parties of blackfellows prowling around,

and one lot of out-and-out bushrangers. We must move at once, or we may be speared where we stand."

"I 'll lead my horse. He is about used up," said Sir Frederick. "I owe you my life, Beard—and the boys' lives —"

"Never mind that," interrupted Beard, somewhat grimly. "We will hide your saddle and bridle in a safe place, and we will leave your horse where we can find him. I think it won't be safe, just now, to go into my house by the front door. We can get in by the side door, though, I 'm pretty sure, and I can give you something to eat and drink."

"Is Hugh there?" asked the baronet.

"I left him there with Ned," replied Beard. "If they have gone out, they will soon get back again. We were intending to go to your camp to-night, if the way should be clear."

"But my wife and my niece. Do you know anything of them?"

"They may be at the camp, for all you know," said Beard; "or we may meet them on the way. You were lost not far from one another. Come, we must hurry!"

CHAPTER XII

THE OTHER DOOR OF THE CAVE

HEN Ned Wentworth parted from Hugh Parry under the great tree at the front door of Beard's house, he set out with a purpose of his own.

"If I understood that man," he remarked aloud, "after the river leaves the waterfall it goes around the mountain, or through a cleft in it. If that 's so, I can find it again. If I do find it, Hugh and I could make our own way along the bank, whether Beard comes with us or not. He does n't wish to come, or to meet anybody. I can see that."

On he went, therefore, choosing ground that was not too rough and broken to travel over, but keeping as near as he could to the mountain.

"I 'll find the river," he said again, "unless the blackfellows find me."

He forgot that time was passing, and that the day could not last much longer. The sun was sinking steadily, and he was getting tired. The forest was giving place to a short, stubby growth upon sandy soil.

"I can find my way back around the mountain," he said at last; "but I wish I could get to the river for a good drink of water. How long that shadow is!"

He noticed the length of it because it was the shadow of a great rock that stood some distance away.

"As late as that?" he exclaimed. "Then I can't get back to the cave to-night. I must push along and find the river. It can't hurt me to spend a night in the woods. I can light a fire to keep off dingoes. It will worry Hugh if I don't come, though."

Hugh was not thinking of Ned just then, but he and his mother were also thinking of the nearness of sunset, for it was getting shadowy in the dense forest.

"Mother," said Hugh, "I wish I could get some water for you. We must go toward Beard's cave. I can find the way. We 're as safe in one spot as in another."

"I 'd like to get away from this, Hugh," she said; "though I feel safer, now you are with me."

They went forward slowly and cautiously, Hugh leading the horse. The woods grew more and more dim and shadowy.

The six men by the waterfall had gone out, three at a time, and had looked in several directions for traces of the nugget-owner whom they had come there to find; but they had gathered again, to tell one another they were sure of being nearer to him, and that they believed they would have better luck on the morrow.

If Ka-kak-kia's band of blackfellows were not tired, they must have been made of iron, for they had scouted all day long. They had managed with such cleverness that they had not seen, or been seen by, any of their black enemies. The same thing was true of these, for the lame man and his brilliant son made their report concerning white fellows only, and no others were more than suspected of being close at hand.

Ka-kak-kia's followers had a surprise all their own, when they gathered to hear their chief's report of his meeting with his mysterious "friend," whom they all knew, and who had thrown him down and kept him from killing a perfect prize of a big white fellow standing beside a horse. They all agreed with Ka-kak-kia that both of those white fellows were to be again attacked as soon as there was a chance. They also all agreed that it was not a good night for going to sleep. The time could much better be expended in watching for any camp-fire that might be kindled by reckless white fellows.

Their black enemies were of the same opinion, and it was strengthened a little before sunset. One of their number was missing, and they had sent up all manner of sounds to tell him where they were. The black boy, also, had been sent back along his own trail, to hoot like an owl and call the wanderer. He went and he hooted. He even made blunders, uttering animal cries that never sounded in the bush at night, and that roused the suspicions of Ka-kak-kia's party. His hooting was all in vain, and he

hunted on until he almost stumbled over something which made him drop flat and listen. He lay still for a minute, but nobody seemed to be near him. He lifted his head and put out his hand. There was no doubt but that the warrior he had stumbled over had been killed by the bullets of some white fellow. The black boy knew his duty. He took every stick belonging to the slain man. Luckily, he had been an uncommonly well-supplied person. His shield was very good; his waddy-club and stone tomahawk were works of art; his three boomerangs had been made in the best manner. So had both of the two long spears, and the throw-stick, and a climber. He had been a rich man; and when the black boy set out to carry back his latest piece of news, he was armed like a chief. It made him walk proudly, and he kept his eyes busy, in a half hope of seeing something or somebody to throw at,—he had so very much already to throw. He knew about the fight the day before with Ka-kak-kia and his followers, and he was not at all sure that he might not fall in with some of them on his way to rejoin his own people. He felt that he was having a set of remarkable adventures, and that he was in an unsafe piece of country.

Others also felt unsafe, and the men at Sir Frederick Parry's camp decided to sleep only two at a time. They mourned the absence of watchful Yip more than they did that of the other dogs, and they mentioned him more frequently than even the baronet.

As for Sir Frederick and his new acquaintance, they

were getting better and better acquainted as they went along. It was easier for Beard to avoid telling much about himself because Sir Frederick had so many other things upon his mind.

They scouted carefully through the woods, with their rifles held ready for sudden use, but they did not meet anybody, black or white, before they came to the edge of a broken, rocky slope, where Beard remarked:

"We must leave your horse here. We can find him when we come out."

"We will picket him," said the baronet.

That was done with a long piece of bark rope, and then Beard said:

"Now for some dinner!"

"Dinner!" replied Sir Frederick. "I 'd give more for some water just now than for anything else. How far are we from the river?"

"It runs around this mountain on the other side," said Beard. "I can bring that horse enough water to keep him alive; but first I must care for you."

They were walking rapidly up the slope, and right before them was a mass of broken crags, that looked like a good hiding-place.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the baronet, "is this your house?"

"It used to be," said Beard; "but it is n't safe enough now. The blackfellows found it out, and I 'm afraid they told other people where it was. I had to give it up."

It looked as if the entrance of a gap among the crags

had been rudely roofed over with branches and bark, making a shelter from the weather; but there were no signs of any door.

Beard led the way in, and right through, for the gap continued beyond the roofed place. Sir Frederick followed him silently, even after the gap grew dim and began to look anything but safe.

"Sir Frederick," said Beard, "have you any matches? I must light a torch."

A box of wax-lights was held out to him, and a long pine-knot which Beard had picked up was set on fire before he again led the way.

They were in a crooked crack between two vast masses of limestone that met overhead. There was, however, no difficulty at all in following it, until they came to a point where Beard paused and exclaimed:

"Now, I 'm glad you are a man of firm nerves and good muscles!"

"What 's that sound?" asked the baronet.

"Nothing but water," said Beard. "I 'll give you some quickly. Hold the torch while I go down."

Sir Frederick took the flaring torch, and held it far out, to see what Beard was doing.

"Here is a rope-ladder," said Beard; "it 's strong enough, but it 's a little clumsy, and you must hold tight. I 'm all right. There, hand me the torch."

Down he went like a man who knew the way, and Sir Frederick's good nerves did not prevent him from shudder-

ing when he saw how long that swinging ladder was. The torch stopped going down, and Beard shouted:

"Get a good hold to start with! Come on! It won't break."

Sir Frederick Parry was a brave man, and he was very thirsty. Thus far he had suffered no harm, although his clothes were somewhat dusty, and he had every reason for trusting the man who had saved his life. Still he felt uneasy when he gripped that ladder of bark rope and began to scramble down into the unknown gloom and darkness all around that side door of Beard's house.

"There!" he exclaimed as soon as his feet reached solid rock. "It 's a very remarkable place. Is it much further?"

"Why, no," said Beard, lifting the torch. "Here we are only a hundred feet or so from the passage that leads to my 'front door.' I did n't have a chance to let the boys know about this entrance, but I told them it was here. We might have come in the other way, ourselves; but it seemed to me that this was safer, after we met Ka-kak-kia."

Sir Frederick followed Beard out through a broken group of stalactites and stalagmites, and then Beard said:

"There 's the fireplace, and the fire is still smoldering. The boys have gone out to scout around. I half expected that they would, but I cautioned them not to go too far. See, Sir Frederick, here 's the place where they must have cooked their dinner."

"HELEN SAT DOWN IN THE SHADE OF A TREE TO THINK."

"Why, they may not get back to-night. They may lose their way again," exclaimed the baronet.

"I don't think so," replied Beard, as he heaped more wood on the fire. "I gave them careful instructions. I 'll go for water. What do you think of my house?"

"It is indeed a wonderful place," replied Sir Frederick, warmly.

Beard went away with his torch in one hand and his tin kettle in the other, and the baronet continued: "I have heard there were a great many caves in this geological formation. It is really not at all remarkable. The wonder of it is that I am here, and that Hugh and Ned have been here. Oh, how thirsty I am!"

That difficulty was removed as soon as the tin kettle came back from its dip into the chasm, and then Beard said:

"There 's all the meat you need to broil. Go ahead. Cook and eat as comfortably as you please, but I must not waste any time here. I must know what 's going on in the woods. Besides, I think I can get you some coffee for breakfast."

"All right," said the baronet. "I can broil my own dinner. I hope the boys will return while you 're gone."

"Likely as not they may," said Beard. "I shall not be gone long"; and before anything else could be said he had vanished.

"I declare," remarked Sir Frederick to himself, "he has gone, and he forgot to tell me how I 'm to get out of

this place. I 'm corked up like a fly in a bottle. What if he should not come back? I 'm in a very remarkable situation. Still, I must eat something, and I 'll wait for Hugh or my red-bearded friend, whoever he may be. He 's a great puzzle to me. That was a grand wrestling-match between him and the blackfellow! He must be made of steel and whip-cord!"

So the baronet sat by the fire, broiled kangaroo meat, and made an excellent meal.

Poor Helen Gordon, tired and hungry, there by the river-bank, could not make up her mind to lie down as the darkness came on.

"I dare not sleep," she said; "but I can sit down and lean my back against a tree."

She did so, and the deerhounds came and stretched themselves upon the ground beside her, and Yip put his head into her lap and whined, and then whirled and sat alertly in front, looking keenly out into the darkness, as if to say: "I shall sit up and keep watch."

She was, at all events, better guarded than were Hugh and his mother, now picking their slow way, with greater and greater difficulty, along through the deepening darkness. That is, it was very dark except in open glades where the moonlight poured in: and yet they were almost afraid of such helps, because in those places other eyes might see them.

CHAPTER XIII

NEAR THE CAVE

HUGH and his mother knew that other eyes must be near them. Hugh had already told his mother all that had happened to him and Ned Wentworth since they had left the picnic party to hunt; but she was too thirsty and tired and excited to say much in reply. She was afraid to have him talk now, except in whispers; but he insisted that he knew where they were, and that they were getting nearer the "front door" of the cave-man's hidden house.

"I cannot walk any farther, Hugh," she suddenly exclaimed. "I am faint."

There was an answer, but it did not come from him. "Silence!" was the warning from a shadow near them. "Down, both of you! Let them go by!"

Down sank Lady Parry and her son, shivering with surprise and fear, while there was a rustling sound near.

"Hugh," whispered the voice, "I 've found your father. I 've brought him into the cave. You and your mother

must wait just where you are. Three of those robbers have scouted this way. They 're going back to their camp soon, and when the coast is clear you can go right in. Wait till you hear me 'coo-ee-e' before you move. I 'll draw them off for you."

"Mother," whispered Hugh, "it 's Beard. Keep still!"—and he added to the cave-man in the dark, "All right; we 'll wait."

A few minutes later, they heard the trampling of feet, and the sound of rough, low voices, passing very near them. She put an arm around Hugh, and he raised his gun and cocked it with a thrill of courage.

That was the last scout made that night by the white robbers; but the blackfellows were still stirring, and the little black boy had yet another thing happen to him. He had almost found his people, or believed that he had, and indeed several of them crept close to him in the gloom. He believed it until two of them caught him by the arms, and a harsh voice rasped out: "Ka-kak-kia!"

He was a captive once more, and in worse hands than before. He was likely to lose all his sticks again, and his life too. He knew it, but he behaved with stubborn pluck, and did not utter a sound.

Ka-kak-kia did not intend to kill his prisoner, or to steal sticks from him.

He told him to go and find his friends, and to say that the blackfellows must stop killing one another until after their fight with the white fellows, of all sorts, should

be finished. They must act, for a day or so, as if they were friends.

It seemed an unheard-of proposal, but the black boy listened, and at the end of it they let go of him. He gathered all the sticks he had rescued, hugged them tightly, and darted forward, hardly more than half sure that he had not been killed.

His next report was to his lame father, and then all the others of that party knew what had become of their slain comrade. When they heard the strange proposal made by Ka-kak-kia, they at once agreed to it; for short truces are a sort of custom among all their tribes. Then the woods heard cry after cry that must have been understood, for in a very short time the blackfellows of both parties were grouped together around a fire they had lighted. But not one of them had anything to cook by it, or was then likely to have, for all the food found or stolen in the robbers' camp had been eaten.

Helen Gordon was suddenly startled from the half nap into which she had fallen. She sprang to her feet with a frightened exclamation, and she breathed quickly for a moment as she strove to remember where she was. She thought of being brave, too, and drew her revolver out of its case; but it seemed to tremble so much as to be of no use.

There was the river, gleaming in the moonlight. Behind her lay the dark, terrible forest, with its untold dangers.

At her side were the two faithful hounds, baying their angry warnings at something yet unseen. Helen's first thought was of the dingoes, but then she remembered the blackfellows. One of the dogs dashed forward, and Helen heard:

"Who could have expected to find you here! Where 's the camp?"

The other dogs followed the first, and Ned Wentworth found himself nearly upset by them.

"Oh, Ned!" cried Helen, half sobbing, as she sprang toward him from the foot of the tree.

"Poor Helen!" exclaimed Ned. "Why, where are all the rest?"

In a few moments she explained.

"We 'll start right away," said Ned. "We can get back to the cave by moonlight. There 's no more danger in trying it than there is in staying here. You mount, and I 'll lead the horse. Come!"

He felt as if he were a knight-errant guarding a princess from giants and dragons. For her part, Helen felt almost cheerful.

"Don't talk, Helen," said Ned; "we must make no more noise than we can help."

Still, they did exchange a few whispered words as they went along.

After Beard left Lady Parry and Hugh, he moved away rapidly, seeming to be laboring under strong excitement or

"NED FELT AS IF HE WERE A KNIGHT-ERRANT GUARDING A PRINCESS."

even suffering. It was only a minute or two, however, before they heard a clear, prolonged "Coo-ee-e! Coo-ee-e!" at some distance.

"There," said Hugh. "That must be Beard. It means that we can go right along. Come, Mother, we can get to the cave. Father is safe somewhere. So is Helen. Come! It is not so very far."

"Coo-ee-e!" sounded again, a little more distant.

"Don't you see, Mother?" said Hugh; "Beard is drawing the robbers off."

The three robber-scouts followed the coo-ee-e rapidly, for several minutes, because it was leading them toward their own camp. Then one of them said:

"Jim, it 's no use! I 'm fagged out. We can't catch anything in the dark. All I was hoping for was to surprise him by a camp-fire or in a shanty."

So they gave up the search; but that coo-ee-e had been heard by the blackfellows also, and had brought them all to their feet except Ka-kak-kia. He had a very good reason for not heeding it.

"Friend," he said; and then he explained to the rest that he knew the voice very well. "Not kill him right away," he said; and all answered, as with one voice, in their own tongue:

"That 's the white fellow who can't be killed. He won't die."

Somehow or other, they had all acquired that notion concerning the cave-man.

Hugh helped his mother to mount her horse. The noble animal was more thirsty than weary, and plodded along, keeping his head over Hugh's shoulder, as if afraid of something, he knew not what. Lady Parry was regaining her courage. She had found her son, and she was now going to find her husband.

Her husband, sitting there in the cave, began to feel almost as if he were no better off than before. He was no longer hungry or thirsty. He was too strong a man to be tired, and he was becoming restless.

"I saw him go out in that direction," he remarked, at last. "Maybe I could find that front door without any help. At all events I can't be cooped up here any longer."

He kindled a torch, and tried to find Beard's way out. He went only a step at a time, studying the walls and the pillars, and as he walked, he talked to himself:

"Here are two saddles," he said, "and bridles. He seems to have all sorts of things—firearms and tools. I wonder who he is, and what he is doing here? An escaped convict, most likely. But, then, he did n't wish to do me any harm, and he would n't let me hurt the blackfellow. There 's certainly some good in him, and I must n't forget that he saved Hugh's life, and Ned's life, and my own. Hullo! Here 's a sort of opening. I 'll explore it. Ah—I have put out my torch!"

He had bumped his head, and put out his torch against the low, sloping roof of rock above him.

"It 's a pokerish place to creep about in," he went on. "What 's that?"

He was suddenly aware that there was somebody else in that narrow passage. He spoke no more aloud, but his thoughts were busy.

"I hear breathing. Some one is surely creeping in. They have found the front door, that he said was so safely hidden. Shall I have to fight a blackfellow in here? It can't be one of the boys. Either of the boys would have spoken. I 'd better get out my revolver!"

Hugh at the same moment was making ready his revolver. For Hugh and his mother had reached and found the front door, and they were creeping into the cave. The boy had also heard some one moving, for he was saying to himself:

"It can't be Ned or Beard!"

"Hugh," said his mother aloud, "I wish I could stand up. Can't you call out and let anybody in there know we are here?"

"Hugh? Hurrah!" And then, knowing her husband's voice, Lady Parry exclaimed:

"Is that you, Frederick? Quick, Hugh! Move faster! You are not hurt, are you?"

"No; wait—I 'll relight the torch," said Sir Frederick. "If this is n't the strangest meeting!"

Before long they were standing in front of the fire, and Hugh was heaping it with dry branches from Beard's wood-pile.

"Has n't he a beautiful house, Mother?" Hugh asked, as the brilliant blaze lighted up the cave. "I will go for some water, Father, while you see whether you can get mother something to eat."

"Hugh, take some water out to the horse, if you can," said his mother.

"Of course I will!" said Hugh, promptly.

He picked up the tin kettle, a coil of bark rope, and a torch, and walked far into the cave. His mother's eyes followed him for a moment, and then she turned and put her hands upon Sir Frederick's shoulders, and looked anxiously into his face.

"Fred," she said, "what can have become of Helen? Do you know anything about her?"

"I hoped that both of you had found your way back to camp," replied the baronet, gloomily. "I still hope that she did."

Hardly had he said the words when she heard the barking of the dogs, and Ned and Helen entered the cave.

Ned Wentworth led Nap through the forest and through the scrubby growth along the foot of the mountain. Helen was no longer thirsty, but she was so weary and faint that she could hardly keep the saddle. Ned himself felt his weariness coming back again, but it was as nothing compared to his anxiety lest he should lose his way. He almost forgot his fear of the blackfellows in his dread of wandering.

"Here we are, Helen!" he exclaimed at last. "I can see the tree. We can leave Nap here, but the danger is n't quite over. Can you walk?"

"I can, for a short distance," said Helen, smiling bravely as he helped her down; "but—I am so tired!"

Off came the saddle and bridle to be hidden in the underbrush, and Nap was turned loose to feed, while Ned, with Helen leaning upon his arm, walked bravely on through what seemed to him their last danger.

"It 's over at last," he exclaimed, as they reached the tree. "Now, Helen—" he drew a long breath of dismay at that moment, and exclaimed in a frightened tone:

"Helen! I 'm afraid we are too late. The cave has been discovered! Somebody has gone in and left the front door open!"

"But, Ned," said Helen, "see the dogs." For in a flash the dogs had scrambled into the entrance to the cave.

"That 's a good sign, I think," said Ned. "I 'll go ahead, anyhow, and you creep in after me. Do you dare to follow? It 's dark!"

"I 'll come," gasped Helen. "I can't stay here."

Ned was already disappearing into the burrow. Helen felt fainter than before, but followed him upon her hands and knees.

"The torch is gone," she heard Ned mutter. "Well, we must go ahead. I 'll be ready to shoot. See, there 's a light coming! Helen," he added more loudly, "somebody 's here. I hope it 's Hugh!"

"Who 's there?" shouted a deep, gruff, yet somewhat shaky voice. "Speak quickly!"

"Who is it?" added a woman's voice. "Is it you, Ned Wentworth?"

"Aunt Maude and Uncle Fred! Both right here in the cave-house!" exclaimed Helen.

"Helen Gordon and Ned!" exclaimed Sir Frederick. "Can it be possible?"

Hugh had hurried with the kettle of water, and was back at the fireplace when the party met at the front door. He saw the dogs, too, and he called:

"Mother, has Ned found Helen?"

"Hugh," came back the voice of Sir Frederick, "they are all found!"

"We are safe," remarked Lady Parry, thankfully; "but—I wish I knew how we are to get back to camp,—and to 'the Grampians.'"

CHAPTER XIV

THE WINGS OF THE COFFEE-POT

ARGE caves are very likely to have branches. Beard's cave, at a first glance, seemed to consist only of the vast hollow which began at the fissure leading into it from under the great tree. The fact, however, that it had a side door proved that it was very much like other caves.

So far as any of Beard's present guests were aware, the space near the fireplace was the most comfortable room in his "house." If it contained no chairs, there were blocks of stone to sit upon. There was no other furniture, not so much as a dinner-table, as the guests remembered when the boy cooks announced that dinner was ready, as they shortly did.

"I 'm sleepy, rather than hungry," said Lady Parry; "and I am tired enough to sleep, even on a stone floor."

"Sir Frederick," came, at the moment, from among the group of pillars near the entrance, "will you please step this way for a moment. Ned—you come, too!"

The voice was deep and clear.

"That 's Beard!" said Ned. "I 'm coming—"

"Come here, Beard," said the baronet.

"No," he replied; "I 've another matter on my hands. I am glad you 're all safe."

Sir Frederick was a man accustomed to have his own way, but the flush that came to his face was quickly gone, and he arose and went to the cave-man.

"Beard," he said, "come in and speak to Lady Parry and my niece. They wish to thank you—"

"Not now! There is no time!" said Beard, hastily. "In among the stalagmites, yonder, you will find some grass-matting bags stuffed with moss. They will be better than the rock for the ladies to sleep on. Ned, get your gun and come with me."

"All right," said Ned, and he went back for his gun, although even his tough young muscles had a strained feeling.

"Sir Frederick," continued Beard, "not one of you must venture out while I am gone. The woods are full of dangers. Hugh and Ned must bring me a kettle of water for the horses,—just to wet their mouths a little."

"We 'll stay here," said the baronet, and he turned and repeated the warning to Hugh and Ned.

Then he tried to ask Beard a number of questions, but he was altogether unable to obtain from the cave-man any information. So he went back to Lady Parry and Helen. The water was brought, and Ned followed his strange friend out into the open air.

"I know where to find the horses," said Beard. "Just a little taste for each will do, till we get back. I sha'n't be gone long."

Ned crouched in some underbrush while Beard disappeared among the shadows.

"He shut the front door carefully enough," said Ned to himself. "What can he be up to? I can stand it better than Hugh can. I 'm tougher, somehow. He 's about used up; but then he 's stronger than I in pulling or lifting."

Ned had but a short time to wait, and he was almost surprised that nothing happened to him while he was waiting. He was getting so used to have queer things happen that he missed them if they did not come.

"The horses have been needing that water," remarked Beard, when he came gliding back and put down his kettle. "They 're all right, and we can find them in the morning. Now, Ned, you and I must go and get some coffee for Lady Parry. We shall get another prize or two besides."

"Coffee?" exclaimed Ned. "Where can we find coffee in those woods?"

"Come with me, and you will soon see," said Beard.

A strange thought entered Ned's mind. He saw that Beard seemed much excited; he hardly appeared like the same man. His motions were nervous and quick, and he spoke rapidly. Could it be possible that the cave-man was losing his reason? Perhaps he lived away out there because he was crazy, and could not live with other men. It was a

terrible thought, and Ned forgot his weariness while he watched his companion.

"We 'll get some coffee," repeated Beard. "She 's only a woman, and Helen 's but a young girl. They need more care than men and boys. I 'm glad they are in my house; but they 're not safe yet, by any means. I know all about them."

"How do you know all about them?" asked Ned.

"Lady Maude is a noble woman," said Beard, without noticing the question. "I know about her; I knew a brother of hers, once."

"Did you?" said Ned, eagerly. "What sort of a fellow was he?"

"A most unlucky fellow," said Beard. "A great fool, too. So proud that he was hardly sound in his mind — hot-tempered and obstinate. He got into trouble at home and ran away. He had a stepfather who was not fair to him — or so he thought. Just a fool of a boy, that 's all. He ran away and got into bad company, and he was too green to know how bad it was. They were thieves and counterfeiters, and he had n't been with them three days when they were caught and he was found with them. I was in the court-room when they were tried."

At that moment there was a rustle in the bushes near them, and Beard stopped short, and lowered his rifle from his shoulder. Ned did the same, but the rustling sound went away, a jump at a time, and the cave-man muttered: "It was some animal."

"You saw them tried?" said Ned. "Was he convicted? Did he tell them who he was?"

"He was too proud for that," said Beard. "He went by the name of Rogdon — just a twist of his own name. Yes, he was convicted and sentenced to transportation."

"And he was transported?" said Ned.

"Yes," said Beard; "he was sent out here, to Australia, and his pride was as great as ever. He got away into the bush among the bushrangers, and he could n't get along — even with them. He seemed to make enemies wherever he went — in short, he was the greatest fool you ever heard of."

"I know," said Ned, as they walked rapidly along, keeping a sharp lookout, "the bushrangers are about the worst thieves in all the world."

"That 's so," said Beard; "they are all of that. They are sharp, too. They called Lady Parry's brother Big Red, and whenever anything worse than common was done, they all laid it to him — to Big Red; and the colony government offered heavy rewards for him, dead or alive."

"What became of him?" asked Ned.

"Oh, they believe he was lost in the woods somewhere," said Beard; "or else he 's over among the mountains, or in the gold-diggings, or living among the blackfellows where no white men will ever come. It 's years and years since they 've heard of him."

"I guess they must have given him up long ago," said Ned.

"I suppose they have," said Beard; "but he had an older brother that was heir to the family property, so it did not make so much difference."

"He 's in the army and he 's in India," said Ned. "Helen is his daughter. She has lost her mother, and Lady Parry is bringing her up."

"She is a noble woman!" exclaimed Beard.

It had seemed to do him good to tell that story, and he was quieter now; but Ned had only a dim idea of the direction in which they had walked.

"Now, Ned," said Beard, "we 're getting near the coffee-shop. We 've scouted around your old camp by the waterfall. The robbers are there. I 'm going to show you something new pretty soon — my coffee-shop."

"Coffee-shop?" said Ned, and again it occurred to him that Beard must be going crazy.

"Here it is," said Beard, about five minutes later.

"Why, it 's another big tree!" exclaimed Ned.

"Only the stump of one," said Beard, laying aside his rifle. "I want you to stand right here. When I let down anything, you unhitch the rope it 's tied to. It 'll take me quite a while to climb that stump in the dark. The moonshine can't get in here to help me."

Ned now, for the first time, noticed a coil of bark rope that the cave-man carried over his shoulders.

"He is n't climbing the tree," he next remarked; "he is walking away into the woods. I do believe that man 's gone crazy. He 's surely insane!"

Beard seemed to know what he was about, however; for he went very straight to the tree he had first ascended by, when Ned was not there, and up he went into its branches. He crept cautiously along, grasping hard and making sure of his hold. From tree to tree, and up, up, up he went, as if he had been a human orang-outang or a gorilla.

Ned watched with keen anxiety, standing there between the ashes of the old camp-fire and the foot of the stump. He was not looking up, but rather watching the gloom around him lest any enemy should steal in and take him by surprise.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, "what 's that?"

He was severely startled, indeed, for something had swung against him with a blow that all but knocked him down.

"It is a saddle!" he said. "Beard has lowered it from the stump."

He felt better as he loosened the loop that held the saddle. There were a bridle and some other things with it. Up went the rope, as soon as it was loose, while Ned remarked to himself: "But that is n't coffee."

A few minutes later, as he gazed upward, he saw something coming down which seemed to glimmer a little. It was lowered slowly and steadily until he could take hold of it.

"It 's a coffee-pot!" he exclaimed. "It 's bigger than the one in our camp, and it is two thirds full of coffee!"

There was really something startling in receiving a pot of coffee in that manner.

Ned waited patiently, but Beard had finished his errand at the top of the stump and was on his way down. He had quite a number of curious questions to answer, when he again came within Ned's reach.

It did not take him long to find a hiding-place for the saddle and other things, and then he and Ned and the coffee-pot set out for home.

All was very quiet there. The sacks of moss had been found, and Lady Maude and Helen fell asleep upon them as if they had been their own beds. Sir Frederick and Hugh had only a small sack for their heads to rest upon, the other part of their bed being rock. Both of them tried to keep their eyes open, but it was of no use, and even Yip and the hounds went to sleep. The cave was really the safest sleeping-place in all that wilderness. It was silent, except for the dull roar of the torrent.

"Now, Ned," said Beard, as they plodded along with the coffee-pot, "we are to do a little work that is not without danger. We must get a look at the fellows who are trying to find us. You keep close to me, and be silent!"

Cautiously, stealthily, they went forward, and Ned was trembling with excitement and expectation.

"There!" whispered Beard. "They have built a fire. Look sharp now!"

Ned could at first hardly discover the faint glow which

"IT WAS LOWERED SLOWLY AND STEADILY UNTIL HE COULD TAKE HOLD OF IT."

his companion had seen; but it grew brighter as they crept nearer, and before long Beard whispered:

"Those are the blackfellows. Both bands are together now; Ka-kak-kia's band and the other have united. That means just so much greater danger for us. If they were fighting each other, we could escape more easily. I 'm glad to know they 're camped, though, and are not out after us. Come, Ned; it won't do to scout any nearer a camp of blackfellows. Their ears are quicker than a dog's. We must now take a look at the land-pirates."

Ned nodded, without a word, and the cave-man went forward again as if he almost knew the paths of that forest in the dark. He did not have to travel far before he again whispered, "There!" and the glow of another fire began to blend faintly with the gloom of the forest.

"We can venture nearer to them than to blackfellows," said Beard, "but we must n't actually risk anything."

"We must get safe back to the cave with our coffee," replied Ned.

Beard seemed entirely satisfied with what could be seen from under a bush a hundred yards away from the camp. Three of his enemies were lying down, asleep. Two were sitting up, rifle in lap. One was walking around as a sort of patrol. Beyond the glow of their camp-fire could be dimly seen the glitter of the thundering waterfall. It was a sight well worth coming to see. When they were a little further away, Beard whispered to Ned:

"They mean to come after us — or after me — in the morning; but I don't believe one of them will get back to the gold-diggings. The blackfellows' camp-fire is too near this one. No," he continued. "They won't do any more mining,— or robbing."

Ned thought of the other camp-fire, with the blackfellows around it, but it all seemed much like a dream.

"Come along, Ned," whispered his friend. "I can't quite understand why there is n't anything stirring, here or there. Hist!"

Ned looked toward the land-pirates' camp.

The men on guard, looking out into the dark, could not have seen anything, but a tall, naked human figure passed swiftly, glidingly along, between Beard and Ned and the firelight. He held in his hand a long spear, and he raised it and shook it threateningly.

"He is going to spear one of them!" whispered Ned, excitedly.

"No, he is not," replied Beard. "He is only threatening because he feels like it. They never throw a spear with the bare hand; they pitch them with a throw-stick."

The blackfellow glided along into the darkness, and the men he had threatened had no idea that he had been near enough to have sent his long spear among them.

"Most likely," said Beard, as he and Ned again pushed forward, "the blackfellows will wait and follow them by daylight, when they can do better throwing, and try some plan to attack them separately. That 's their way. Of

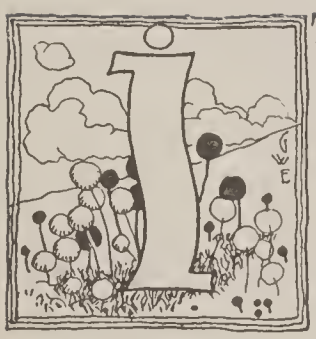
course, they are watching Sir Frederick's camp, but they don't know about the cave."

"Don't you ever get tired?" asked Ned, in a very weary tone of voice.

"I hardly know what tire is," replied the cave-man, smiling. "I 'm all right. Here we are. Now, you carry in the coffee and tell them how things are. Tell them not to try to leave the cave till I come. I think it would be sure destruction for them to make a start just now. So remember, Ned!"

CHAPTER XV

THE GREAT DINGO PACK



T seemed to Ned Wentworth as if the cave-man vanished, so suddenly did he disappear among the shadows, after his warning. Ned's own idea, however, was that Beard had not at all exaggerated the peril they were in. When he took out the bark door to go in, it occurred to him that the ground in front of it was plainly foot-marked.

"That 's dangerous," he said to himself. "All of us but Beard wear boots and shoes and leave tracks. There will be a regular path made and the blackfellows will find it. We must get away from this place before they do; so must Beard. I don't think he is crazy exactly, but then he is the queerest kind of fellow. I wonder if he has n't been a convict?"

Meanwhile Ned pushed along through the burrow.

Suddenly there came a low growl, very close to his face.

"Why, Yip!" exclaimed Ned. "I hope you and the other dogs remember me!"

The dogs did remember him, for the growl was followed by whines of eager welcome. All the rest were sleeping soundly.

"I 'll go to sleep, too," said Ned. "I am glad I did n't waken them."

He put more wood on the fire, and lay down near the other sleepers, and the dogs also lay down again.

All were asleep there, but not everybody under that mountain-side was asleep.

The cave-man was then in a kind of cellar with a flaring torch in his hand, looking down at something on the floor. It was not a large room, and it was ruggedly irregular, with no entrance to be seen excepting a wide opening at the top. On its flat rock floor lay rows and rows of just such little bars of yellowish metal as he had cast at his fireplace with his crucible and his sand-molds.

"They 're all pure gold!" he said aloud. "Heaps of it. But of what use is it, to me or anybody else? I took pleasure in gathering it. There was danger, too, and plenty of good, hard work. It kept me busy, and I used to dream of ways to get out into the world and spend it."

He was silent for a little, and then he went on talking to himself.

"It is of no use. I see how it is. I shall never get out of the bush. I must stay here. Perhaps I can save them, out there. Perhaps not. There are almost too many robbers and blackfellows, and I don't see exactly how to dodge them all."

He continued to stare at his ingots and to consider their possible uses.

"If I could get out into the world," he said, "and carry them with me, I could have houses, and lands, and friends, and have a home again, and not live and die like a wolf or a savage. Burrowing in a cave, like an animal, with nobody but wild beasts and cannibals for neighbors!—and yet, for all that, I am a very, very rich man!"

He said the last words slowly and sarcastically, while he turned over some of his ingots with his foot.

He turned away from the ingots, clambered up through the hole at the top of the cellar, and the light of his torch showed that he was in one of the many wide cracks of that honeycombed limestone rock. He walked along as if he were thinking.

At length he said, "I 'll let them all sleep until they wake of themselves. They were all up late, and they need a long rest. They have plenty of hard work before them. I would better go and water the horses. They will have work enough to do before they get to 'the Grampians'—if they ever reach there."

The passage he was in led into the main cave not far from the chasm. He left his torch there, and the dogs paid no attention to him when he came noiselessly to get the tin kettle. Yip and his two friends knew it was his kettle, and that he was the man of the house.

Beard poured some water down in a hollow of the rock for the dogs to lap, and then he went out. Next he went

up the long, swaying ladder, almost as easily as a sailor climbs into the rigging.

Though fastened at each end, above and below, it was loose, and it swayed about in the half darkness left by his torchlight. Close at hand was the yawning chasm, full of the roar of the torrent below, and few would have dared go up or down. Beard did not seem to mind it, but went up and down several times to bring water. Each time he came up, he was absent for a while. He must have visited the horses, for at last he remarked:

"There! They will get along well enough, now I 've herded them together. And they can be found, too, when they 're needed. They won't wander away from one another. Horses are sociable, and love company. And, anyhow, it must be almost daylight now."

He went and took a look at the sleepers in the cave, and he gazed long and earnestly at them, but said nothing. He stepped lightly past them, and soon returned with a rifle. He went toward his front door, but when he had crept close to it, he hesitated.

"There 's danger in opening it," he said, "but it 's safer now than it will be an hour or so later."

He pushed very gently at first, and then harder, but the door seemed to resist him.

"Something 's the matter with it," he thought, "but I can't hear anything. Somehow or other, too, the peep-hole is plugged up, and I can't see out. It is n't so dark but I ought to see at least a gleam. I 'll widen it a little."

He drew his long, keen bowie-knife from its sheath, and put the point of it into a slit of the door that he had felt for with his fingers.

"Yow! What 's that?" exclaimed a voice on the other side of the door.

"Keep still, Jim! What on earth 's happened to you?"

"I must have backed against somethin' with a p'int to it. Somethin' on the bark," said Jim. "It did n't hurt much, though."

The point of Beard's knife had barely scratched Jim as he leaned against the door, but he was not hurt enough to draw his attention long from something in front of him.

"Bill," said he, "we were fools to come out so early, but who 'd have thought of dingoes?"

"This is a good enough place to face them in," said Bill. "They 'll only watch us till daylight. But it 's a small chance."

"We 've got to shoot," said Jim, "even if the blackfellows hear us. They 're not near us, or the wolves would n't be here."

"It 's a wandering pack," said Bill, "and they scented us. Here are more of them!"

Beard lay still and listened, and he heard enough to understand the matter. The robbers were too uneasy to remain in their camp, and this pair had ventured out in the first faint twilight of dawn, to have a hunt after him and his nuggets.

They had found nothing yet—not even the blackfellows; but a pack of the dingoes which infested that forest because of its plentiful game had found them. The men had backed down into the hollow between the tree roots as a good corner to fight from. There they crouched while all the bushes around the hollow became full of snapping jaws, lolling red tongues, fierce eyes, and sharp scratching paws that tore the earth, in eagerness to get at them.

"Give it to them, Jim," said Bill. "They 're coming too close."

Crack, crack, crack! followed, and Beard knew that there were no misses made at such close quarters. Three of the nearest wolves tumbled over, and the two fellows in the hollow felt safer, for they could be attacked only in front.

"We 've killed some of them," said Jim. "It 's getting lighter, too. Keep it up, Bill. Steady, boy! There are not so many as there were."

Beard could see through the slit now and then as Jim's body moved, and he was listening intently.

"If it 's the big pack," he whispered to himself, "it 's all over with Bill and Jim. I don't want to watch what 's coming."

"Bill," said Jim, "there are more dingoes than I reckoned on. Quick! Give me the cartridge-box!"

"I did n't bring along any cartridge-box," replied Bill. "I did n't suppose we 'd need any more."

"That 's my last shell, then!" answered Jim, despairingly.

"And mine, too!" said Bill, as he fired once more, and then drew his knife.

Beard hurried back through the burrow as fast as he could go, remarking:

"It 's enough to make one's blood run cold! I 'm afraid none of us in here will ever get back to 'the Grampians'!"

None of the sleepers had been disturbed. Even the dogs lay still, unaware that anything strange or new was occurring outside.

"The big dingo pack seems to have thinned out a little," said Beard to himself, as he stepped silently on through the darkness of the cave. "I hope so. Luckily, they never stay long in one place. They 'll go away as soon as the sun is up. It 's the only big pack I ever heard of. They usually hunt in squads."

He disappeared, and another hour went by, and another, and then at last Sir Frederick Parry awoke and sat up.

"Hugh, my boy," he said, "are you awake?"

"Yes, Father," said Hugh, as he sprang to his feet. "And there 's Ned. He 's sound asleep—"

"Let him sleep,—he 's tired out," said Sir Frederick; looking up, he added suddenly, "Why, there 's a coffee-pot!"

The voice of Lady Parry answered:

"Coffee? I 'm glad there is coffee. I was just wondering what we should do about breakfast. Helen, dear—"

"I 'm awake, Aunt Maude. I 've been awake quite a while. Are we all really here in a cave, or am I dreaming?"

"Here we are," said her uncle, standing up; "and as for breakfast—"

"Put the kettle on," said a voice from the dark. "There 's plenty of coffee, but no milk or sugar. The cups are by the fireplace. Come this way, Hugh, and we 'll get the kangaroo. Bring a lighted torch with you."

"Kangaroo!" exclaimed the baronet. "Where can he catch kangaroos, down here, underground?"

"Why," said Hugh, as he held the end of a torch to the fire, "don't you remember? It 's the one we shot at our camp, when the dingoes drove them into it. We brought it here, and hung it down in Mr. Beard's refrigerator, as he calls it."

"That 's it, is it?" said Sir Frederick. "I had forgotten all about the refrigerator."

Hugh went with Beard, and in a few minutes he returned, carrying a good supply of fresh, nice-looking cutlets, all ready to broil. In the mean time Lady Parry had given attention to the cooking, and the coffee-pot was steaming over a bed of hot coals. Suddenly Lady Parry called out:

"Where is Mr. Beard? I wish very much to see him."

She spoke so earnestly that she awakened Ned, and he sprang to his feet, rubbing his eyes. Hugh replied:

"Why, Mother, he has gone on another errand, and he said nobody was to go out at the front door on any account."

"Did he say why?" asked the baronet, hastily; but something that he saw in Hugh's face made him add, "All right. I suppose he knows why. Now we will have our coffee. He made his own coffee-cups, apparently."

Sir Frederick picked up, one after another, several rudely shaped earthen cups that lay near the fire, and examined them.

Beard himself needed breakfast as much as anybody; but, for some unknown reason, he had decided to eat it alone, without coffee. At that very moment he was cooking for himself over a fire he had kindled in the roofed cranny of the rocks at his side door. The sun was well up in the sky before he had finished his meal.

"I think it is time now," he said, "for me to go and see how things look under the big tree."

He went cautiously, skulking from rock to rock and from tree to tree, all around the broken angle of the hillside. He proceeded more and more carefully as he approached his own front door, although he remarked to himself, "Of course the dingoes are gone,—and so are the men."

He reached the spot at last, and glanced rapidly around.

"Is it possible!" he exclaimed. "Well, the whole pack must have been here. But the rifles are gone, and even the

knives! Nothing left! Have the blackfellows come here? Or have the four other rascals been spying about? Somebody must have finished what the dingoes began."

That was evident. Only human hands could have left his yard entirely clear of some proofs of what had taken place, yet there were only scattered cartridge-shells.

"It must mean blackfellows," he said. They never leave behind a strip or rag of cloth. I don't think either they or the robbers are likely to come back to this place, but the wolves will be sure to come. Our chances are about as bad as bad can be. I must have a talk with Sir Frederick, but I won't see the others."

He opened the bark door as he spoke, and disappeared in the burrow.

CHAPTER XVI

WILD COMPANY IN THE CAVE

T was a blue morning, in spite of the sunshine, at Sir Frederick Parry's river-side camp. The men were all up, but no two of them were of the same mind as to what they were to do next.

"We can't go back to 'the Grampings' without them," said Marsh.

"I 'd spend the rest of me life here a-huntin' for them," said Bob McCracken with energy, "before I 'd give it up they were gone."

The other two men had nothing to say.

"Boys," remarked Marsh, after a long silence, "we 'll see to the hosses and mules, and then we 'll have another day's hunt. There 's no telling but we might find them, somewhere."

They had much to say about blackfellows, while they were getting ready, and they were a gloomy, downhearted set of men. Again and again they regretted the absence of the dogs.

Yip and his two comrades were very busy at about that time. Without orders the three dogs had undertaken an exploration of the cave, but the mystery of it had seemed to be too much for them. They came back from the edge of the chasm with drooping tails, and, sitting down, they all barked and howled in that direction.

"Maude," said Sir Frederick, "it is very remarkable how the echoes of that howling multiply. It sounds as if there were a hundred dogs."

At that moment something new caught his eye, and he arose and walked to the other side of the cave.

"I declare!" he said, as he picked up the crucible. "A regular smelting-pot. Slag, too. Maude, this fellow has been melting down metallic ore of some kind or other. It is curious. There is no metal to be found in rock of this character. No mine of any description can be around here— But, then, this is an extraordinary country."

He studied the crucible and the slag a moment, and then said:

"I hope Beard will return soon. He said he could easily guide us to the camp. I 'd like to know what the men are doing."

"We may be thankful, indeed, if we ever find it again," said Lady Parry. "Even at best it may take a week to reach 'the Grampians'—perhaps two weeks."

"Aunt Maude," said Helen, with a face beaming with courage, "now that we are all together again, it seems to me I can endure anything. Last evening, there I was, all

alone in the woods, worn out,—oh, how glad I was to see Ned and the dogs come! Hear those dogs, now!"

They were indeed making a great noise, and the sound seemed to be echoed back in peculiarly mournful howls, pitched in different keys, vastly increased in volume, and very much confused and mingled.

"It 's queer," remarked Sir Frederick,—"it is really extraordinary that the noise of those dogs should separate and multiply and change so in being echoed. I must ask Beard if he has noticed anything of the sort. I thought, a moment ago, that I almost recognized Yip's howl among them."

It was very curious, certainly; but everybody has noticed what odd effects echoes will have at times. Everything about the situation of the Parry family was uncommon, as Ned and Hugh were even then saying. The main point which they were arguing was whether they should venture to disobey Beard's injunction and take a look out into the open air.

Meanwhile a very different series of conversations took place elsewhere. The men in Sir Frederick's camp were talking much of him, and wishing he were there to give them fresh orders.

The four bad fellows, in the camp by the waterfall, were discussing the fate of their two comrades who had gone out so early and had not returned.

"What on earth has become of them?" was asked again and again; but there was no answer.

But Jim and Bill had not fallen victims to the wild dogs. While they stood at bay with drawn knives, resolved to die fighting, and hopeless of rescue, the band of blackfellows came running through the woods.

They knew how to frighten dingoes, and at once set up a chorus of wild yells. This diversion, together with the stout resistance made by the white men, was too much for the pack. With one accord they turned and made after the blackfellows. No sooner were the besiegers gone than Jim and Bill ran into the woods, and climbed trees. The blackfellows had previously adopted the same plan.

The savages did not know that the white men were so near. The rattling reports of their shooting had first attracted the quick-eared blackfellows, while now the fact that the white men were not firing led the savages to take it for granted that they had gone to their camp.

The sun arose, and another very natural resolve came to the dingoes. They had watched men in trees long enough, and enough of them had been slaughtered to satisfy them for one morning. They came to a howling decision of that sort, at last, and the entire pack set off upon an easy gallop along the mountain side. Not one of them had been in sight when Beard came out at his side door that morning and went to examine his front yard.

At the foot of each of the trees which contained the forlorn white fellows lay an empty, useless rifle which seemed to look up mockingly at its helpless owner.

"Bill," exclaimed Jim, suddenly, "look yonder! If that does n't beat me!"

"There he is," said Bill. "That 's the man!—he 's as unconcerned as if nobody was after him!"

"Could n't we pepper him, just now!" said Jim,—"if we had cartridges."

"But we have n't a cartridge," said Bill. "Besides, we don't want to pepper him till after we 've made him tell us where he 's hid his pile of nuggets."

"That 's so," replied Jim; "but we 've got something to tell the boys, now."

So they sat there in the tree-forks and talked about Beard and of what they meant to do to him, long after he was hidden from their sight by trunks and foliage. He, on his side, had no idea that he had been seen, although he knew it was quite possible. He was studying the wrecks and relics of the fight between the dingoes and the two white men.

"How those brutes will devour one of their own kind, as soon as he 's knocked over," he remarked, just before he went into his house. "There seems to be nothing eatable that they won't eat."

Ned and Hugh were still busy with the question of whether they should venture out, when they were startled once more.

"Ned, come this way," exclaimed a voice which Ned supposed to be at that moment far away.

"I 'm coming," Ned replied; and then he added, speaking in a low voice to Hugh, "How that man does get around!"

"Well," said Hugh, "he knows the way. The dogs are out yonder, and yet they did n't hear him."

"Ned," said Beard, as soon as they were together among the pillars, "I want to have Sir Frederick come in here, and nobody else. Do you know what 's the matter with those dogs?"

"They are scared at the chasm, or at the dark, I suppose," said Ned.

"No, it 's not that," said Beard, anxiously. "Tell him to come here, right away. I know dogs, my boy. There 's something in that cave that 's alive and moving. What can it be? Tell Sir Frederick to come here! Quick!"

Ned sprang back to the baronet and gave his errand in a swift, excited whisper, adding:

"Don't scare Lady Maude and Helen, nor Hugh, either. Come!"

But Sir Frederick Parry was not easily frightened. He rose, and answered:

"I 'll go, my boy. You and Hugh put more wood on the fire. Call in the dogs."

In a moment more he stood face to face with Beard. The two men were of nearly the same size, but there was a marked contrast between the long-bearded, roughly dressed man of the woods, and the elegantly dressed, closely cropped English gentleman.

"What is it, Beard?" he asked, and Beard told him rapidly all there was to tell about the blackfellows and the white men outside the cave.

"Now, Sir Frederick," said Beard, "do you hear your dogs?"

Ned and Hugh were vainly trying to quiet them, and Yip and the hounds were barking furiously.

"Remarkable echoes," replied Sir Frederick; "very extraordinary, indeed!"

"Echoes!" exclaimed Beard. "Don't you recognize that howl? How they got in I cannot imagine, but the *great dingo pack is in this cave!* It comes into these woods every few months. It comes and goes. It 's here now?"

"Wolves in the cave!" gasped the baronet. "And there are cannibals and ex-convicts outside!"

"I 've had to face such things, year after year," said Beard, bitterly; "but I 've been alone. I never had to take care of women or boys. I 'm glad we have so much fuel right here. That will help. So will one thing more—if we dare do it!"

"What 's that?" asked the baronet.

"Why," said Beard, "we must build another fire further down the cave. It will keep them off, perhaps with some shooting to help, until we dare venture out of the front door and try to reach your camp."

"I 'm ready," said Sir Frederick. "You 're a brave fellow."

Beard was truly a brave fellow, but the beads of per-

"'THAT 'S THE GREAT DINGO PACK,' SAID BEARD."

spiration came out on his broad forehead, as he stood and listened to the clamor, which seemed to be momentarily increasing. Sir Frederick's face, also, betrayed his feelings, and now they both darted forward.

"We must have torches!" said Beard, quickly. "All of you gather up pine-knot sticks and light them. Boys, bring all the wood you can carry. Load your guns. Let the ladies help, too. They can light torches and carry wood. I 'm glad there 's plenty of firewood."

"Helen," said Lady Parry, "I don't know what it is for, but some danger threatens us. We must do as he says."

"I can carry wood," said Helen. "I have found a splendid torch-stick. My revolver is loaded, too."

The dry pine-knot at the end of the stick kindled swiftly and threw a strong glare of ruddy light over her excited face, and she looked very resolute.

Ned and Hugh sprang to their work with but a dim idea of what it was for, while Yip and the hounds redoubled their barking; the noise from the other end of the cave also grew louder and more hideous, helped as it was by all the echoes from the sides and roof.

"Bring the wood here, Sir Frederick," said Beard, and they quickly halted at the very edge of the chasm. "We will kindle our fire here," he went on. "It 's odd, but I never made much of a fire here before. I never brought anything bigger than a torch."

Down went the wood, in a growing heap. It was dry, a great part of it was resinous, and it kindled fast. Up

sprang the dancing blaze, throwing a bright fire-glow upon the vaulted roof, with its glittering white stalactites, and upon the stalagmite-dotted floor, strewn with fragments. Down into the mysterious chasm went the new illumination; but all the party were staring across the chasm, not into it, as Beard exclaimed:

"It 's not nearly so wide as I thought it was, but still they can't jump across. Look!"

They looked, and they all drew short, shuddering breaths, though they could not see much, after all. It was only a darkness, into which the firelight streamed flaringly, showing an array of greenish, gleaming eyes, clashing teeth, and shadowy shapes of heads and legs.

"That 's the great dingo pack," said Beard. "No doubt about it. How they got there puzzles me entirely. I never was over on that side of the chasm."

"Do you think they can find any way to get around to this side?" asked Sir Frederick, uneasily.

"Not that I know of," said Beard. "There they are. The cave must go to the river-bank on the other side of the mountain. It runs all around it, you know—

"Ned! Hugh! Hold on! Don't shoot!" suddenly shouted Beard, as the boys were lifting their guns. "You will bring down a shower of stalactites on our heads! There comes one! Back to the front of the cave!"

Crash! And then a thunderous roar followed the fall of that stalactite, mingled with the mournful howling of the dingoes and the yelps of the terrified dogs.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GREAT CAVE-OVEN

A-KAK-KIA and his followers and their enemies, with whom there was now temporarily a truce, had of course made a search after Beard and the white horseman whom he had rescued, but they were not surprised at failing to find either of them. One of the cave-man's strong points, in their esteem, was that they could not kill him, while another was his magical power of vanishing.

They were puzzled, however, as to what had become of the two white fellows who had shot the kangaroos by the cabbage-palm prairie. They were also deeply interested in the six white fellows encamped near the waterfall, and as to the best method to take in boomeranging or spearing them.

They were holding an animated debate upon these questions, when the rattle of the shots fired by Bill and Jim came to their ears. After that, the presence of the great dingo pack gave them yet another problem, but they knew

the habits of wild dogs. Many kangaroos and other game had come or been chased into those woods; many squads of dingoes had been attracted, and, for once, the usual order of things was broken up. A hunt for something to eat was as necessary to them as to the fierce creatures who had already treed so many of them, after driving away any large game from that neighborhood; and they decided to hunt, and fish, and dig before waging another war. They were pretty sure of success. All animals, large or small, all birds that could be reached, nearly all things were food to them. The Australian blackfellow has no narrow prejudices, and he can live well where the ignorant, helpless white fellow might starve. It was also true that they could do, at the same time, all the scouting needful, and they scattered in all directions.

Bill and Jim were still sitting in the forks of their respective trees, discussing the dingo question, the blackfellows, and Beard, when they heard a cautious "Coo-ee-e" at no great distance.

"Bill," exclaimed Jim, as he answered it, "those are our fellows!"

"What on earth are you two doing up those trees?" the new-comers asked.

The explanation, which was given as they were getting down, brought on a lively talk, and it seemed as if even the dingoes were of less importance than the actual sight of the owner of the nuggets and the excellent chance of catching him.

"We are sure of him now!" they said. "Bill and Jim can go to camp for some rations. We 'll go and take a look at the place where you met the dingo pack. Don't you be gone too long. We 'll get him!"

They were hardened to the dangers of the life they were leading, and they knew, besides, that four experienced riflemen were a strong party against any enemies likely to come.

The four went and stood under the great tree before Beard's front door, and looked at it; but they never dreamed of burrowing under the roots of the tree.

The great cavern was still secure, so far as any search from without was concerned. Never before had it been so brilliantly illuminated, but the people in it were not admiring the white splendors around and above them. The cave-man himself had been the person nearest to Lady Parry, as they retreated from the edge of the chasm toward the fireplace, and she had stared at him with a strangely bewildered expression upon her face. Suddenly she staggered and reeled, and he put out an arm, as if to catch her, exclaiming:

"Sir Frederick! She is fainting!"

"No, I am not," she said; but it was evidently with a great effort, and his help was really just in time. He was compelled to support her for a moment, before she could recover herself. Ned Wentworth had been almost as quick to come, torch in hand, and he held it very near. As he did so, he saw that Lady Parry had turned pale, and he

thought that he heard her say something. Then he saw the cave-man's face turn deadly white, and it seemed as if he also said something. It sounded like:

"Silence! He is dead!"

"I never noticed it before," said Ned to himself, "but Lady Parry's eyes and hair certainly are very like the cave-man's."

The likeness came out strongly in the torchlight, and a strange idea came flashing into the mind of Ned. But Lady Parry had already recovered her composure, and Sir Frederick had been listening to Hugh.

"Father!" shouted Hugh. "Did you see those dingoes? They are crowded over! Down they go! One, two, three of them! Look!"

One after another, three unlucky wild dogs, pressed by an eager rush of their companions, were forced over the edge of the chasm. Down they went, and the splashes of their plunges into the water below could be heard.

Their barking, or something else, had detached a big stalactite from the roof over that side of the chasm, and it had fallen, with a shattering and a scattering of fragments, right among the pack. One or two must have been crushed and others injured; and all were smitten with a sudden panic.

The fire and the falling rock, together, had temporarily conquered their ferocity, and they fled, howling, into the unbroken darkness beyond.

"Of course they can get out," said Beard, "and we 're rid of them for this time."

"I am thankful," said the baronet. "It is a great deliverance. But what I am thinking of is the horses. If they die of thirst, or if the wolves find them, we can't get away."

"They are cared for!" exclaimed Beard. "They 're all away down below the mountain, on the river-bank, about where Ned found Helen. There 's water enough there and good grass, too. They 'll be ready when we want them."

"You 're a thoughtful man," said Sir Frederick, heartily. "I don't exactly see what to make of you."

"Frederick," said Lady Parry, huskily, "come with me!"

Again Ned Wentworth thought he saw Beard's face turn white, but he had a question to ask, and it kept him from noticing closely.

"Beard," he said, "we 've made a fire here, but there 's more smoke than that can make. It seems to me, I smell burning leaves."

"Leaves?" said Beard. "You are right, Ned; there 's smoke coming up from the chasm! I can't understand it. I had some bags of leaves, to sleep on, in my old place, but it can't be those. What can it be?"

Lady Parry had led her husband away, and at that moment she was looking earnestly into his face, while she held his arm with both her hands. She was saying something rapidly, and Ned heard some words, and others in the deep, husky tones of the baronet.

"Fallen so low as this!"

"He saved our lives," she said. "Yours, mine—"

"Yes, Maude," he responded; "but what brought him here?"

"He saved our lives!" she repeated, as if she could think of no other answer just then.

"Yes," he said, "and I do not mean to be ungrateful; but how did he ever come to live in a house of this kind? Beard," he added, more loudly, to the cave-man, "can you come here for a moment?"

"Not now, Sir Frederick," responded the cave-man. "I 'll explain by and by. Something new has happened. Do you smell that smoke? See it come up from the chasm!"

"It smells like burning grass," said Lady Parry. "Is the forest on fire?"

"Not the forest itself," he said thoughtfully. "It 's too green, I should say. Sir Frederick, I must speak plainly. We may be in great peril."

"How so, Tom?" said the baronet, throwing an arm around his wife.

"Tom?" said Ned Wentworth to himself. "That was the name of her brother, in the story he told me! That was the name of the convict they all turned against. That 's why his hair is like Lady Parry's."

Beard—or Tom Gordon, if that was his name—hesitated for a moment, and then replied to Sir Frederick:

"I never went over to the other side of this mountain. It 's more of a hill—a ridge—than a mountain, and it is a succession of rugged ledges covered with thick scrub. You can't get through, it 's so thick. I always took for

granted that the river ran around it, but it does n't. That 's the river, right down there in the chasm. It runs underground for some distance, just like twenty other Australian streams."

"But it won't burn," said the baronet, "and the forest won't burn."

"The scrub on the hill is dry as tinder, at this season," said Tom. "The rubbish under it will burn, and there 's a seam of lignite, that 'll burn almost like hard coal. It 's all afire, I think."

"Are we to be suffocated?" asked Lady Parry. "Can't we get out at the front entrance?"

"Now the dingoes are gone, there are only the blackfellows and the white robbers to fear," he said; "I must go and look out."

"But the side door?" said the baronet. "No; Maude and Helen could never climb that ladder."

"Sir Frederick," said the cave-man, with a shudder, "that door would lead us out into the fire, I 'm afraid. Besides, one of our worst perils is on that side. I 'll tell you what it is, as soon as I get back."

He strode away and disappeared among the pillars; for they had all now returned near the fireplace.

"Maude," said Sir Frederick, "this is all so strange, so unexpected, that I 've got beyond being surprised by anything. I 'd hardly be startled if the roof should fall."

"The boys have heard enough—" began Lady Parry; but she was interrupted.

"So have I, Aunt Maude," said Helen, excitedly, though not speaking loudly. "Is he my Uncle Tom? Is Beard really Tom Gordon?"

"Sir Frederick," said Ned, "may I tell what he told me?"

"Yes," said the baronet.

"Quick, Ned!" exclaimed Lady Parry. "Tell it before he gets back."

Ned was eager enough to tell all that he had heard during his moonlight scout with Beard, and he was listened to with close attention.

"I believe it," said Sir Frederick. "I believe every word of it."

"Believe it?" exclaimed Lady Parry. "Of course I believe it. Tom 's a wronged man! Why did he not let us know! My poor brother! He was always reckless, and he was proud, too!"

"I 'm glad he 's my uncle," said Hugh. "I knew he was a gentleman, the first glimpse I had of him."

"That won't save his life," said Sir Frederick, thoughtfully. "There 's too much evil-doing been laid at his door. I 've heard enough about him to hang a dozen men. All the other villains made him a scapegoat."

"Frederick," said his wife. "Tom could not have done anything wrong!"

"I don't say he did," replied the baronet. "I mean that all the bushrangers laid their deeds to him, and he would have to suffer accordingly. There are rewards offered—"

"But he did n't do it!" exclaimed Helen. "I know he did n't do it! They can't hang him for something that he did n't do."

"Yes, they might," said Sir Frederick. "I don't see how he 's to get out of it."

"We 've got to save him!" exclaimed Hugh. "He saved our lives!"

"Sir Frederick," said Ned, "I guess we can, too. I 've an idea in my head that occurred to me when he told me the story, that night, of how to save just such a man as he told about." Ned talked rapidly on for a minute or so.

Out at the cave door, Beard, or Tom Gordon, was peering anxiously through the slit and into the faces of four men. Every face he looked into was that of a man who had been justly convicted of crime.

"Boys," said one of them, "he 's right around here, somewheres. We 'll capture him, nuggets and all."

"He can't get away, this time," said another. "We 'll fix him. Pity we could n't take him in and claim the rewards offered for him."

"We can't do that," was the reply.

Beard, behind the bark door, muttered to himself: "They won't get him; but I don't see how he 's to get out of this. We 're all shut in an oven."

The four men now began to make remarks about the smoke, and to wonder where it came from.

"I had a torch, before daylight, this morning," said one of them. "I threw it into some scrub, not more than a

mile above here, when I was scouting toward the river, away from the rest of you. It might have lit—"

"Well, I guess it did," said another. "Look up yonder!"

They looked along the slope, as he pointed, but there was less and less to see, every minute. Great clouds and columns of smoke were rising, and were driving before the warm north wind that was beginning to blow.

Tongues of dancing fire now and then shot up out of the smoke-clouds. There could be no doubt of it, whatever,—all that side of the mountain was ablaze, and the flame was crossing the ridge to come down on the other side. It fed upon dense, dry scrub and underbrush, and the rubbish collected there, century after century. There was fuel enough, and, now it was so well kindled, there would be fire and smoke enough. The four robbers said so, and Beard, or Tom Gordon, heard them, and he went back into the cave to tell the story.

Sir Frederick Parry heard him through, as did all the rest; but while they looked at each other in silence, he beckoned the cave-man to follow him.

"Tom," he said,—"are you really Tom Gordon? Ned Wentworth has told us the story you told him—"

"I 'm Maude Gordon's — Lady Parry's — brother Tom," the cave-man replied; "but that 's of little consequence, just now. I 'm a doomed man, at all events, and I 'm afraid we 're all lost."

"I believe every word you 've said," interrupted the baronet; "but the Yankee boy has been proposing something

we can talk about, pretty soon. What did you say about the greatest danger being at the side door? How can anybody get in there?"

"Nobody could," said Tom Gordon. "That is not the danger. I 'm a miner. That is, I have been —"

"I saw your crucible," said the baronet, "and I hope you succeeded —"

"I did," said Tom. "I hope to show you how well; but that was done by placer-work,— washing out, you know. I found a good quartz vein, though, and I was fool enough to set out to work it, just for something to do. I needed to do some blasting, and I bought all the powder one other party had. They 'd failed. They had six kegs of blasting-powder and two big kegs of dynamite, and it 's all stored in the crevice we came in by, at the side door. Logs are heaped over it. We 'd run the risk of it, if we went that way —"

"Is it sure to explode, sooner or later?" asked Sir Frederick, calmly.

"Of course it is, when the fire gets in there," said Tom Gordon; "and there 's no telling what it will do to the cave and the mountain."

"It will be a heavy blast," said the baronet. "At all events, the dingoes won't come back while the mountain 's on fire. Is there any chance for us at the front door?"

"Toward night there may be,— if we 're alive then," said Gordon. "We must get ready, anyhow."

"If I can once reach my own camp," said Sir Frederick,

"I think I can see you cleared. The Yankee boy's idea is a good one."

If the baronet had then been at the camp, he would have seen a very extraordinary affair. His four men had evidently been riding far enough and fast enough to tire their horses, and had brought them back to the river for water. All had dismounted, and now stood staring out at something that floated down the swift current of the river.

"Marsh," said Keets, "they can just keep their fore paws well over it."

"It rolls under them — don't you see?" said Marsh.

"Don't I see?" exclaimed Bob McCracken. "Don't I? Well, I do see, and I never in all my life before saw three wolves a-floatin' down-stream on one log!"

Three mournful howls from the dingoes on the log came back for answer. The plunge down the chasm had, indeed, not been high enough to kill them.

CHAPTER XVIII

TOM GORDON'S TREASURE

"TOM," said Lady Parry, coming nearer to him and her husband, "I wish you would tell me more about yourself."

"No, Maude," he replied; "not now. If we ever get out of this place alive, I shall have enough to tell you."

"Have you any idea what to do?" she asked. "The fire cannot get in here."

"No," he said. "Yes, there is one thing we can do, while we are waiting. Come with me, Sir Frederick and Ned and Hugh."

He strode away, and the baronet and the boys followed him down the sloping floor of the cave. He and Sir Frederick carried torches, and the boys had to be told to leave their guns, for there would be nothing to shoot.

"Where can they be going, Aunt Maude?" asked Helen.

"I have no idea," said Lady Parry. "How I do want to know more about Tom! It is so many long years since we lost sight of him! Why, my dear, your uncle has prop-

erty in England—not much, but enough to live on. His brother—your father—would n't keep it from him a day."

"Of course he would n't," said Helen; "but what good is his property, if they hang him for things that he never did?"

"It 's a dreadful situation!" said Lady Parry, weeping. "Why did we ever come out into the bush!"

"Why, Aunt Maude," said Helen, "we did n't know it, but we really must have come out here after Uncle Tom."

"And now we 've found him," replied Lady Parry, between her sobs, "it is only to die together."

"I don't believe it," said Helen. "And we 'd never have found him if we had n't lost ourselves first."

Tom Gordon walked out of the main room of the cave by a rugged, gloomy, water-dripping corridor, and the rest followed him with eager curiosity. Sir Frederick was about to ask where it led to, when the cave-man halted, remarking:

"Look down through that hole. I used to amuse myself by making bags of kangaroo-skin to put the gold in. There 's enough of them. Sir Frederick, you and I and Hugh can go down and pitch the sacks up to Ned. Stay here, Ned."

"It 's all gold!" exclaimed the baronet.

"I ran it into bars as well as I could," said the cave-man, "but the heap of slag out there by the fireplace has lots of gold in it yet. I could n't get it all out, you know."

Down they went through the hole before them, and they stood among the spread-out bars on the floor of the treasure-chamber.

"Mark what I say now, Sir Frederick," said the cave-man. "Look at this stuff. I never could quite understand why I worked so hard to get it, seeing I had no use for it, and could never have. Now we may get you back to 'the Grampians,' and we may not. It 's pretty sure death for me, anyhow. If I get through into the world, of course the gold is all mine. If I don't, you need n't say where it came from. Give Ned a quarter of it, and divide the rest between Hugh and Helen. You and Maude and my brother Robert do not need any of it. Perhaps the young people don't, but I hope it won't hurt them."

"I 'll do just as you say," said the baronet. "Trust it with me. But I think Ned's Yankee idea will work. It 's just this —"

"Not now," said the cave-man, beginning to pick up the bars and drop them into the little leather bags that lay beside them. "No time to talk; put them in the sacks and pitch them up to Ned."

It was easy and rapid work, and as soon as it was done they all clambered back to the corridor.

"There," said the cave-man, looking at the heap of bags; "about a ton of it. I 've been at it, year after year, and trip after trip to the gulches, melting, casting, there and here, because I had nothing else to do. I had nothing to spend it on, and nobody to divide with."

"Well," replied the baronet, "the bags weigh ten or twelve pounds apiece. You and I can take two in each hand, and the boys one in each hand. That 's twelve bags among us—about a hundred and fifty pounds or less. We can carry it all out to the front door, if we 're not too long doing it; but we can't take it away with us."

"Not this time," said Tom Gordon. "But it 'll be there if we can come back. I think we must work fast."

They gathered up their loads and went, and no sooner were they where they could be seen than Lady Parry, standing up with a torch in her hand, with Helen at her side, exclaimed:

"Frederick, where does this smoke come from? Is the cave on fire? Is it a volcano?"

"No, my dear," said he, quietly, "it 's only the scrub and brush outside. The cave 's all right."

"What have you there?" she asked.

"Some of Tom's property," he said.

"Mother!" shouted Hugh. "It 's all gold! Heaps and heaps of it! Uncle Tom 's a rich miner—"

"And the poorest man in all the world," added Tom, himself. "An outlaw, with a price on his head—a mere dingo, to be shot on sight."

"You must not be discouraged," said the baronet, hopefully; "Ned Wentworth's idea 's a good one. We can carry it out."

Down went the bags among the pillars, near the burrow to the door, and they hastened back for more, leaving Lady

Maude and Helen talking over the remarkable matter of the gold bars. It was less and less easy to talk without coughing, for the smoke was becoming dense and pungent.

The four men at Sir Frederick's camp had watched the wolves go by, and then Marsh remarked, with a slow shake of his head:

"B'ys, I knowed that dingoes could swim. Yes, I knowed they was good swimmers, but think o' the likes o' that?"

"'Deed and I 'd heard they could swim," said Bob McCracken. "I 'd heard tell how cute they was, too — cunning as foxes. But who ever heard of 'em goin' to sea on a log, to help 'em cross a river?"

The forest grew dim with smoke, blown down from the blazing slope of the mountain. It was as if the bright December sky were getting densely clouded, and the air grew uncomfortably warm, even for that hot season of the year.

It was a bad day for hunting and for fishing and for scouting. All the hunters and fishermen, whether black or white, wasted a great deal of time in watching the fire which was now sweeping so fearfully over the mountain.

"That fellow will find himself roasted, Bill," said Jim, "if he 's up there."

"No, he won't," said Bill, "but it 'll drive him down to where we can get at him easier. All we 've got to do is jist to wait and let it burn, till it drives him out."

"We 'll watch around and get him," said one of their comrades; "but the fish won't bite while that fire 's burning."

Tom Gordon had explained to Sir Frederick that this was precisely what he believed his enemies would do.

"Well," replied the baronet, "but they 'll never dream of troubling you while you are with us. It is n't six to one any longer. It 's six to four."

"Exactly," said Tom Gordon, "but those blackfellows are on the watch, too. We must avoid them as carefully as we do the robbers."

"That is n't all, Sir Frederick," said Ned Wentworth. "You don't want any one to know he 's gone with you. That 'd upset everything."

"Of course it would," exclaimed the baronet. "Why did n't I think of that? It 's because Ned 's a Yankee."

"Well," said Tom, "I 'm a sort of Australian-Yankee. And it 's time for me to do a little scouting. I 've got to take some risk, and I 'll take Ned with me. You must keep still here till we get back."

"How long?" asked the baronet.

"I 'm after—the—horses!" was all the reply made by the cave-man, for some smoke in his throat made him cough. "There 's no time to lose."

The great hollow of the cavern was getting dim and blue, and not another word of opposition or inquiry followed Gordon and Ned as they hurried out.

Sir Frederick's face grew suddenly pale over a thought that came to him. He was always listening, as if in dread

of the explosion, and that was one thing that made him so very silent.

The same thought kept Tom Gordon and Ned and Hugh silent also.

The cave-man looked as rugged and rough as ever, when he and Ned crept out of the burrow and stood in the bushes at the foot of the great tree, looking and listening.

"The smoke 's a help to us," said he.

"I came pretty near calling you 'Beard,'" said Ned. "Yes; I 'm glad. They can't see far. There 's one thing, though; if we get the horses, what are we to do about the saddles and bridles?"

"They 're all right," said Gordon. "When I was out, in the night, I gathered them all into one pile."

"I don't see how you did it," exclaimed Ned.

"I took a horse with me," said Gordon. "I knew where they were. Now, Ned, down on all fours till we get under cover. Creep close after me!"

Down dropped Ned, and he felt at once a little safer. It seemed, too, as if the air had so many sounds in it that a mere rustling could not be heard by anybody. Voices were louder, however; and they had hardly reached the first clump of thick bushes before Ned stopped short. He stopped partly because Gordon made a kicking motion back at him, with his right foot.

"I hear them, too," said Ned to himself.

"Seen anything of him, Jim?" said a deep, gruff voice, not many feet away.

"Not a sign of him," replied another. "Have you seen any blackfellows?"

"Not a sign of one," replied Jim.

Just at that moment Ned heard a whirring sound in the air, and saw something flit above his head.

"Hide, Jim! hide!" was shouted vigorously. "That boomerang did n't miss me six inches!"

"Now 's our time, Ned!" whispered Gordon. "Creep for your life! The blackfellows don't yet know that we 're here."

Ned followed him, with an idea that he had never until then known how close to the ground he could creep, and how fast he could go.

"I 've just got it to do," he said to himself; but at that moment he was again warned by Gordon's foot. He crept alongside of him.

"Be careful!" whispered Gordon.

"There they are," whispered Ned. "Half a dozen of them. Can we get by?"

"Of course we can," said Gordon. "That is, we can lie still here till they all get past us."

Ned lay like a log and felt afraid to breathe, so very near to him and Gordon glided the dark shapes of the savages. There were eight of them, but one was only a boy, one limped badly, and one of them had his left shoulder tied up with leaves, as if it had been wounded.

"Now, Ned, creep!" hissed Gordon. "We 'll be beyond all danger in five minutes."

"'THERE THEY ARE,' WHISPERED NED."

Jim and his friend were dodging nervously from tree to tree, holding their rifles ready to shoot, and remarking to each other that it was of little use to scout after "that fellow with the nuggets," until they had somehow provided against the blackfellows and their boomerangs.

"We must go for the others," they said. "We 'll be safer when we 're all together. We 'll go and get them, and come back."

That was very much what some of the savages themselves had thought. They were not quite so hungry, now, for they had had something to eat, and they had drunk freely of the water they had squeezed from the root-shoots of gum-trees.

"Hugh," remarked Helen, as she stood among the white pillars, in the cave, "is n't it hard to wait, and not to know what 's coming!"

"Unbearable!" said he. "And how thick the smoke is!"

"It is pouring in faster and faster!" exclaimed Lady Parry. "We cannot endure this much longer."

"The whole mountain must be on fire!" said Sir Frederick. "It can't have reached—"

A great volume of hot smoke rushed in, and he sprang to his feet.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FATE OF THE LAND PIRATES

"TOM has been gone nearly two hours," the baronet exclaimed. "He ought to be back, unless he and Ned are in trouble. Maude, we cannot stay here. Be brave, now, my dear. You and Helen must each take one of Tom's extra revolvers. Come, Hugh. We may have to fight our way."

"I 'm ready, Father," said Hugh.

Thicker grew the smoke as they hurriedly made their way to the burrow.

"Yip! Yip!" was the sound they heard in advance of them when they entered the narrow passage.

"I 'd forgotten the dogs," exclaimed Sir Frederick. "They can help in a fight, but they may make it more difficult for us to conceal ourselves."

"They would be valuable help in a tussle," said Hugh, as he scrambled along to the door.

Hardly had he opened it before Yip squeezed past him, followed by the hounds, and Hugh sprang out after them.

"There they go!" he said. "They did n't wait a second. What are they after?"

"I can't guess," said his father, as he stood up and then stooped again to help out Lady Parry. "The dogs have gone, my dear. I am almost glad of it."

"Oh, I am so glad to get a breath of fresh air!" she said.

"Helen, how very pale you are!"

"I was all but stifled, Aunt Maude," said Helen. "I shall soon feel better. Hark, Uncle Fred! What 's that?"

Sir Frederick replied: "I believe we got out only just in time. Now we shall see what will be the effect. There were six kegs of blasting-powder and two kegs of dynamite!"

All around them was the circle of thick bushes before the front door of the cave. Over their heads arose the giant height of the great tree. Along the slope above them, as they looked, the fire was sweeping fast before the north wind, so that the smoke of it did not reach them. All the air was suddenly filled with a dull and thunderous roar, while a puff of dense, white vapor burst out of the hole between the roots, from which they had but just emerged.

"What a crash that was!" remarked Sir Frederick.

"Aunt Maude, look!" screamed Helen. "The rocks up yonder are springing into the air!"

"Only a few feet or so, some of them," said the baronet. "I wonder what damage the explosion will do."

"That fellow went high enough," said Hugh, pointing to a fragment which came rolling down the slope. "Look, Mother, look!"

Lady Parry had uttered one scream, and she was now crouching, white and silent, with her hands at her ears, as if she feared to hear another explosion.

"That 's all there is of it, dear," said Sir Frederick; "but I 'll shut the door tightly. Phew! what a smell of gunpowder!"

It was brought out of the hole by a strong draft, but it ceased as soon as the bark was fitted in.

"Now 's our best time, father," said Hugh. "We can get out into the woods."

"That 's so," said the baronet. "Nobody will be thinking of us."

Lady Parry clung to her husband's arm, but Helen seemed disposed to hold the very large revolver she was armed with, all ready to point at something. She and Hugh led the advance, and he too went forward with a ready-to-shoot vigilance that did him credit. They all halted, a minute or so later, in the first clump of bushes that would conceal them from their enemies. Owing to the smoke and foliage it was useless to look back.

"I would like to know," said Sir Frederick, "just how much of that hill has been blown up."

"Yip! Yip! Yip!" came from the woods. There was Yip, and there were the hounds, and close behind them were Ned and the cave-man, who looked wilder than ever.

"'THE BLACKFELLOWS ARE AFTER THEM,' SAID GORDON."

"Here you are, and I am thankful," he exclaimed. "We thought you were out, when the dogs came. This way! Quick as you can!"

"We got out just in time," said the baronet. "What a blast it was!"

"There 's no time to spare," said Gordon. "They 're all around us. Hear that!"

It was nothing but a series of cries in several directions, as if separated men were trying to find one another, and get together. It was repeated again and again, as the Parry family hurried forward.

"Why, here are all the horses!" said Sir Frederick, in surprise — "and all saddled, too!"

"Now, mount!" said the cave-man; "hold on a moment! Hear that!"

It was a loud "Coo-ee-e!" followed by the crack of a rifle. Then there was another cry, and another, as if the robbers were calling to one another anxiously in the smoky gloom. Then there was more firing.

"They got separated, somehow, and the blacks are after them," remarked the cave-man. "Listen! That 's the last of them. We must hurry, now, but we 're really almost safe. Mount!"

Lady Parry and Helen were helped upon their horses. Sir Frederick and Tom Gordon and the boys sprang to their saddles.

"Steady!" said Gordon, "and keep well together. There!"

"What is it?" asked the baronet.

"That was the last," said Gordon. "I counted the whoops wrong. The villains won't ever coo-ee-e any more!"

"How do you know?" asked Lady Parry, excitedly.

"Ka-kak-kia said so," he replied. "I know his voice. It was the triumphant death-shout of the blackfellows. Come!"

CHAPTER XX

CONCLUSION

T was yet an hour or more before sunset, when the four men who were in charge of Sir Frederick Parry's camp were once more standing in a group together upon the bank of the river. They were eagerly discussing what seemed to them even a greater puzzle than had been the three dingoes on the log.

"Brand," said Marsh, "this river 's giving out."

"It 's gone down more than a foot in less than no time," replied Brand.

"It 's going down and down, boys," said Bob McCracken. "Don't I wish Sir Frederick was here! If the river runs dry, we 'll have to go home to save the horses."

Something or other, to all appearance, had indeed cut off the customary supply of water from that swift mountain-stream, and it was shrinking to almost nothing in its rocky bed. Nothing could be done, so they stood and watched the subsiding water. A loud, cheery shout suddenly rang out in the camp behind them, and they turned instantly.

"Hurrah!" shouted Bob. "It 's Sir Frederick and all of them!"

The others tried to shout, but they were too much surprised even to cheer, and they sprang forward to meet the returning party.

There were endless questions and answers, and at the end of it all there was a confused idea among the men that the Parry family had gone a little too far into the woods, and had been hiding to keep out of the way of dangerous blackfellows. No mention was made of the cave-man, and he had not arrived with the rest.

Bob McCracken set himself to cooking all the supper the camp could provide, with Yip and the hounds dancing around everywhere as if they were glad to get back.

Sir Frederick went to the wagon, and, while the men were too busy to notice him, he carried a large portmanteau into his tent. Then he went back and brought a smaller portmanteau, and he and Lady Parry, and Hugh and Helen and Ned, remained in that tent until supper-time. It looked somewhat as if they might be holding a family council.

They did not have time for a very long conference before the voice of Bob McCracken respectfully informed them that supper was ready.

"Yes, sir," he added, as the baronet came out of the tent, "and that river, sir, is running again as full as ever, sir. All the water it ever had, and a little more."

There was much discussion about the peculiar conduct of the stream, and Bob was probably right when he

suggested: "Yes, sir; I reckon somethin' was choking it for a spell, sir, and then let go."

"Oh, Helen!" exclaimed Lady Parry, "it is so good to get back to camp and to a tent, and to feel safe."

"I wish we were all the way home, at 'the Grampians,'" said Helen, "with Uncle Tom, too!"

"Hush, dear!" exclaimed her aunt. "We must n't speak of him yet. We shall not stay at 'the Grampians' after we get there. We shall set out at once for England."

"Maude," said Sir Frederick, "Ned thinks we should speak of Tom, now, freely, and not let his arrival be too great a surprise to the men. Let them expect him. I am going to follow his idea."

"So will I," she replied. "It is as sensible as it can be. It will keep them from asking too many questions afterward."

"Ned is a shrewd boy," said the baronet.

So it was that even before supper was over, one of the men was saying emphatically:

"It 's the first we 've heard about Mr. Thomas Gordon. Sir Frederick knew what he came into the woods for all the while. There was a kind of puzzle about it till this minute. That 's why nothing bothered him. He 's to wait for Mr. Thomas Gordon till some time to-morrow."

Ned and Hugh were questioned a little after supper, but the men never dreamed of questioning the baronet, and Hugh said that his uncle had been mining, and was now coming back to "the Grampians." This statement satisfied the men.

There was a careful watch kept in camp that night, the greater part of it being done by Yip, for that good dog's mind was disturbed about something. Once he made a rush and was absent for some time in the bush, but he came back with a wagging tail and a satisfied expression of countenance. Perhaps the next best watch was kept by Ned and Hugh, a little before dawn. Marsh was on sentry duty, and he was sound asleep, confiding in Yip, when Ned and Hugh slipped quietly out of camp. Ned carried a traveling-bag, and Hugh had a small portmanteau.

They were gone for only about half an hour, and they came back empty-handed.

"No, Hugh," said Ned, as they got to the camp, "it 's all right. That 's where he told us to leave them, between the two grass-trees."

"I hope nothing has happened to him," said Hugh. "He 's a daring fellow and ready to run any risk."

"Boys," asked the baronet, "did you see him? Was he there?"

"He was n't there, Father," replied Hugh, "but we left the things."

"Well," said their father, "we 'll have an early breakfast, and then we 'll go and see. I 'd like to know just what that blast did for the cave and the mountain."

Before breakfast was ready, Lady Parry and Helen came out of their tents. They seemed to be in a state of expectation.

"Come, Ned and Hugh!" said Sir Frederick, as he finished his coffee. "Are the horses ready? Bob, we may

be gone only a short time, or we may be out till noon. Keep a sharp lookout. Don't be uneasy, but on no account must any of you leave the camp."

It was plain that Sir Frederick was making an effort to appear cool and unconcerned, whatever the reason might be. He recovered a great deal of his composure the moment he and the boys were in the saddle.

"Tom Gordon runs a great risk," he muttered, as they rode out into the forest.

"I hope not, Sir Frederick," remarked Ned Wentworth. "He 's very savage-looking, you know."

"That 's the strong point," said the baronet. Suddenly he cried out: "Tom Gordon! Is it possible?"

There, between the grass-trees, on the ground, lay the luggage Ned and Hugh had carried out. Beside it lay a lot of little leather bags. In front of them stood a tall man, and near by were tethered several horses.

The man was dressed from head to foot in clothing as stylish and as costly as Sir Frederick Parry could provide.

"Well, Sir Frederick," he replied laughingly, "what do you think? Do they fit?"

"They fit perfectly," replied the baronet.

"I am a little awkward yet," said Tom; "the stockings and the boots are especially strange. I 'll get used to them, but they 'll hurt my feet for a few days. Must n't try to walk much."

"But that head of hair! The sooner I play barber the better. I 've brought a pair of scissors—"

"Do your best," said Tom. "My neck may depend upon having my hair properly cut."

Sir Frederick dismounted, and the tangled hair fell to the ground in masses.

"I will make it as close a crop as mine," said the baronet. "How shall I trim your beard?"

"Side whiskers, short mustaches, and a clean chin. Change my face all you can."

"What do you think of that, Ned?" exclaimed Sir Frederick, as the long shaggy red beard was shorn away.

"Think?" said Ned. "Why, he would n't know himself, and nobody will dream he is the same man. He 's not a bad-looking sort of fellow, now."

The barber processes went on to their completion, and then Mr. Thomas Gordon stood still to be looked at.

"It 's a success!" exclaimed the baronet.

"Hugh," said Ned, "he is n't the same man."

"No, Ned, he is not!" said Sir Frederick. "But Tom, my boy, where did you get all those horses? What have you been up to? How about the blackfellows?"

"Why, you know how it is with them," replied Tom. "They never stay where they 've done such a piece of work as they did yesterday. They 're far enough away —what 's left of them."

"Why, were any of them knocked over?" asked Sir Frederick.

"I can't say," said Tom. "I did n't try to find out how

"THERE STOOD A TALL MAN DRESSED FROM HEAD TO FOOT IN CLOTHING AS STYLISH AND COSTLY AS SIR FREDERICK PARRY COULD PROVIDE."

many. I think they had a fight among themselves. What I wanted was to keep clear of them."

"But these bags," said the baronet.

"It 's all here," said Tom. "You know I told you I had some bags sunk in the river. A pretty heavy horse-load of nuggets. I went and got them out. Then I found the horses of that gang picketed by their camp. That told me what had become of the owners. I just took them to the cave and loaded them up. The horse-blankets you and the boys gave me helped me make packs. Some pretty heavy loads — more 'n they ought to carry far —"

"We can put some of it in the wagon," said Sir Frederick. "But how about the blast?"

"You must go and look at that, after breakfast," said Tom. "It 's only five or six miles going straight. Now we 'll load up and go in."

"It 's the best thing we can do," said the baronet.

Lady Parry and Helen were uneasy after the baronet and the boys had ridden away. They grew more and more uneasy and fidgety every minute, until at last Bob McCracken shouted:

"There they come! Mr. Thomas Gordon is with them!"

"There he is!" exclaimed Helen.

A very important cavalcade came plodding into camp. It was headed by Sir Frederick Parry, side by side with a stately, elegantly dressed gentleman — a man who seemed as large as the baronet. Behind them rode the boys, urging along several heavily laden pack-horses.

"Helen," exclaimed Lady Parry. "I never expected that, I 'm sure. It is really wonderful!"

"How changed he is!" said Helen.

In another minute the riders had dismounted, but Lady Parry said:

"Tom, come into the tent! Come in, Fred and Helen! I can't speak to him out here."

"Bob," said the baronet, before he disappeared; "Mr. Thomas Gordon has not had his breakfast."

"All right, sir! Yes, sir," said Bob, darting toward the coffee-pot and the frying-pan. "Get me some more wood, boys."

A few minutes later he remarked to them: "Did ye ever see the like o' the Gordons and Parrys? They 'll all dress up and shave clean, out in the bush, as if it was at 'the Grampings.' There 's Mr. Thomas Gordon, now, right from the mines, and he looks as if he 'd stepped out of a band-box."

Within the tent there had been greetings and even tears, and at last Sir Frederick remarked to his wife:

"My dear, Ned's idea will work perfectly, if we can go straight through to England."

"I am sure I do not wish to stop a needless hour anywhere," she said; "not even at 'the Grampians.'"

"I have no doubt," said Tom Gordon, "that Ned's whole plan is the safest for me."

"His whole plan?" asked Helen. "What is it, Uncle Tom?"

"Why, Helen," he replied. "I wish to see England again, of course, but it will not do for me to stay there.

Ned is going there with me, as soon as he can get the consent of his father and mother. We can see all we wish to see, and then we are off for the United States."

"Do you see, Maude?" asked her husband. "Nothing could be better. As for America, not only will he be entirely safe there, but he can step into business at once with his really large capital. They have some of the largest and finest sheep-farms in the world, in their western States and Territories. Not equal to ours, of course; not like 'the Grampians,' but then you could make a farm to satisfy yourself very well, Tom."

"Ned says I could start a new city, or go to Congress," said Tom, laughing. "I shall indeed have capital enough to start on. Something like half a million, counting it in dollars."

"Count it in dollars, of course," said Sir Frederick, smiling. "You 're going to America! Come to breakfast, now, and then if you 're sure the woods are clear, we 'll go to see what your blasting-powder and dynamite did for that mountain."

"I think we are perfectly safe in going," said Tom; "and, while we are gone, the men can get things ready for a start. I can pilot you to 'the Grampians.'"

The men were left in charge of the camp, with instructions to take down the tents, pack the wagon, and make ready for moving.

"We can make quite a journey before dark," said Sir Frederick, "and we 've been here long enough."

"Indade we have, sir," said Bob heartily.

The ladies had many questions to ask, as they rode along, and Tom told them his experiences. At last, after a long ride through the forest, they came out again on the river bank.

"Why!" exclaimed Helen. "This is where Ned Wentworth found me, when I was lost. Yip found me here, too."

"I wanted to look up-stream from this point," said Tom. "Yes, there 's a cleft in the hill. There always was a sort of deep gorge there, I think, where the stream came out from the chasm. Listen!"

"It sounds like a waterfall," said Sir Frederick. "Was there one there?"

"No, there was not," said Tom. "We must ride to the front door of my house. I want to see how it is."

They rode rapidly for so warm a morning, and it was still early when they came out near the great tree.

"Look!" exclaimed Tom. "Can't you understand, now, Sir Frederick?"

"The top of the hill is gone!" said the baronet.

"My house is gone," exclaimed Gordon. "The whole cave has fallen in. When I was here, last night, I could only get in far enough to reach my gold."

"The roof fell in?" asked Hugh.

"Yes," said Tom, "and filled the deep chasm. It made a great gorge—what the Yankees call a cañon. Everything was ready to tumble, and the blast and the fire did the business! That stream won't run underground any more —at least at this point."

"Aunt Maude!" shouted Helen. "Look! Look under the tree—right at Uncle Tom's front door!"

"I declare," exclaimed Tom. "I knew the water inside must be setting back and rising, but I did n't expect that. Splendid spring it makes, too."

"Hurrah!" shouted Hugh. "Ned, see it burst out!"

There, indeed, bubbling and gushing, was a fine young rivulet, forced out at the burrow between the roots of the tree. It had easily pushed away the bark door, and now it poured forward, seeking a channel for its further passage.

"It 'll turn all this forest into a swamp for a while," remarked Sir Frederick.

"The chasm is gone," replied Tom, "but that spring won't run a great while. Only till the river has plowed down its new channel among the rocks and rubbish."

Suddenly Tom Gordon cried: "Follow me! Quick! There is danger!"

They wheeled their horses, and followed him as he dashed away, but he rode only a short distance before he pulled in and turned his head toward his former home.

"We got away only just in time," he said. "See that? I could see that the roots had been loosened, but the water has been undermining them all night. The tree always leaned a little southerly. It 's coming, now!"

The party were silent, looking expectantly at the vast shape of the forest king.

The great tree was swaying, tottering, and the air was full of a strange, groaning, tearing sound, that grew louder

until it burst into a report like that of a cannon. In another instant, there was an awful crash, and the very earth shook as the gigantic trunk came thundering down. The big trees of common kinds that it fell among splintered like dry reeds. Its out-reaching roots tore up the soil in all directions, and their rugged mass stood up over the deep cavity left behind them like the side of a small hill.

"That is one of the grandest sights I ever saw," said Sir Frederick. "I would not have missed it for anything. Tom, we brought you out of that cave only just in time."

"Somehow or other," said Tom, "a great many things happen only just in time. I don't quite understand, yet, why I came to be out here at all, or what brought you here. It 's a puzzle."

"Is n't it time we went to the camp?" asked Ned.

"I think so, Tom," said the baronet. "The sooner we are at 'the Grampians,' the better for all of us."

Several months later, the same party that had gathered in Sir Frederick Parry's tent that morning in the Australian bush, were gathered again in a breezy, open-windowed drawing-room of a stately country-seat. They were in the ancient English home of the Parry family.

"Well, Ned," said Lady Parry, "I am sorry you must go home, but I 'm glad you and Tom have had time to see England."

"I 'm so glad I have seen it," said Ned. "It 's a great country, and I 'm coming over again, some day."

There was some general conversation, and then Sir Frederick remarked: "Ned's plan has worked perfectly, Tom. I don't see why you need go to the States. Why can't you stay here?"

"Stay here?" said Tom Gordon. "Why, you are going back to Australia, just to see your sheep-farm again, and to be where there 's plenty of room. It 's just so with me. I 've got to live in a new country, to be comfortable. I 'm going away out West, when I get to America—to some place where there are mountains, and forests, and mines. I want some Indians to take the place of the blackfellows. There will be wolves there, too, and deer, and buffaloes, instead of kangaroos."

"You can open as large a sheep-farm as you wish," said Sir Frederick.

Hugh had been looking out of a window, across a closely cut lawn upon which deer were feeding.

"Ned," he remarked, "it does seem so unnatural to have regular hot January weather right in the middle of July, with a warm breeze from the south, instead of from the north. I want to get back to Australia, where things come in their regular season. What are you going to do, first, after you get home?"

"Oh," said Ned, "father and mother are there, long before this. I 've got to go to college, but I 'm going West, first thing, with Mr. Gordon, to see him settled."

"By the way, Maude," said Tom. "I 've attended to that; I have settled enough on Ned to set him up handsomely for life. He is all the boy I have, you know."

They all had known that Tom Gordon intended to make provision for Ned, and they all were delighted, excepting Ned himself. He was silent, until Helen Gordon said to him: "I am so glad of it, Ned! But I am not going back to Australia. I 'm not to go to college, exactly, but I 'm to be put into a boarding-school for two or three years, and then I am going to live with my father in India."

"Oh, Helen!" said Ned. "It seems as if that were further away than Australia, but I know it is n't. Well, then, as soon as I get through college, I will come to India, unless you are in Australia by that time."

"Will you, Ned?" said Helen. "Do come!"

"I will surely come!" said Ned.

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